

THE
HALF-MOON GIRL
OR
THE RAJAH'S DAUGHTER



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THE HALF-MOON GIRL.





"'IT'S A GIRL!' EXCLAIMED HESTER IN AMAZEMENT"

[p. 145]

The Half-Moon Girl

CR

THE RAJAH'S DAUGHTER

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT



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THE HALF-MOON GIRL

OR

THE RAJAH'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

SONG.

A MAN in Brunei, who had come from the Pontianak river, had found a diamond almost as valuable as the one possessed by old Rajah Sandag, which was as large as an owl's egg, and worth more money than Song's imagination could compass.

She was thinking about that diamond as she stood on the steps of the gold-worker's house, and telling herself how much she would like to get a sight of it. Once, ever so long ago, she had seen a diamond, a small one not bigger than a durian seed, and it had sparkled so much that she thought it must be a star which had tumbled down from the dark vault of the night sky: and if a little diamond could make such a glittering show, the larger one must be a sight worth seeing.

Song had seen the man on board a Bugis junk, as she rowed her own small boat up the river, and she was surprised that his face wore such an anxious, discontented expression; surely if the possession of so much wealth could not make a man happy, he must be a very poor creature indeed.

Lost in these reflections, she had nearly capsized her boat in the narrow water-way leading to the gold-worker's house, and had only saved herself by an adroit movement. Heaving a sigh of relief at her escape, she twisted her rattan rope round the post at the bottom of the steps, making her boat fast; and then proceeded to unload her cargo on to the wooden bridge stretching between two houses.

This same cargo was peculiar, consisting of the dead bodies of two different specimens of the monkey tribe, a flying frog, three bats, and a big yellow and black snake, which last being long, and awkward to carry, she coiled round her neck for easier transit, and, picking up a bat in each hand, toiled with her burden up the steep flight of steps to the house of the gold-worker.

It was a large building, containing many rooms, and inhabited by quite a colony of the gold-worker's friends and relations. Two small rooms at the extreme end of the house, however, were tenanted by a stranger, and it was to these rooms that Song carried her burden of dead game.

She did not knock at the door, or in any way ask permission to enter, but pushing it open crossed the threshold uninvited, and was greeted by a hollow cough, which told its own tale of diseased lungs and sore sickness behind it.

The room was bare and sparsely furnished, with a few cases standing about containing specimens of animal and bird life from the forest wilds, while at a small table in the middle of the floor a man was endeavouring to skin a monkey, though with indifferent success, his terrible cough and evident weakness rendering continued effort out of the question. He had the light brown hair and blue eyes of an Englishman, and his fair skin showed all the waxy transparency that accompanies a disease such as that from which he was suffering.

"You are late, Song. I expected you a moon or more ago," he said, turning with an air of relief at sight of her.

"The tuan Poyntz should remember ever that delays are

not far to seek for those who hunt in the wild woods," she answered in her native tongue, slipping the clammy folds of the dead snake from her neck to a heap on the floor, and speeding from the room, to bring up the rest of her cargo.

The man turned eagerly to the two monkeys she had brought; one was similar to that already lying on his table, and he tossed it aside with scarcely a second glance, but he burst into admiring comment over the other, a small, black monkey, with bars of bright yellow here and there.

"Song, Song, it is perfect; where did your people manage to get it?" he asked, stroking its coat with caressing fingers.

"Three days away, up the river; but it will not last, tuan, the colour fades out with life, and day by day the yellow will fade out, until it is deader than that," and she pointed to the neutral drab of the rattan-woven mat on the floor.

"Surely not! Why, Song, if only I could hit on some method of keeping the life-colour in things, my fortune would be made," he said; then paused to cough again.

"The tuan Poyntz is worse?" she asked wistfully, a gleam of pity coming into her dark eyes.

"I should be all right but for my cough; it is the terrible damp of this climate that tries me so," he retorted impatiently, evidently disliking any reference to be made to his condition.

Song shook her head; her merry little face was overcast. "The rainy season is but at its beginning," she said.

"Confound it, no; and yet it has rained more or less every day for the last six weeks," said the man, stooping over the dead monkey again, peering at it as though he were short-sighted.

"The tuan shall rest, Song will do the work," she answered blithely; and rolling up the sleeves of the sacque jacket, which she wore over her blue cotton sarong, she set to work on the animal lying on the naturalist's table, manipulating it so skilfully that the skin peeled off as easily as that of a papaw-apple.

The turning back of her sleeves revealed a circular band

of half-moons tattooed in blue on the dusky red of her plump arm ; a similar band encircled her neck ; and Arthur Poyntz, watching her deft movements, noticed them for the first time.

" Hullo, Song, have you been married since you have been away ? " he asked in great surprise, for, when he had last seen the girl, six months ago, she had lacked this ornamentation, which among her people was usually a symbol of matrimony.

Song dropped her head lower over her task, the warm crimson of her blood darkening her cheek, while a big tear gathered in each of her eyes, and then splashed on to the skinning-board.

" Is he a brute ? Does he beat you, and make you work hard ? " asked the man compassionately. He was years older than Song, verging on middle-age in fact, while she could not have been more than thirteen, or fourteen at the most.

Song shook her head briskly, and with the movement two more tears released themselves and splashed down beside the others. " I wouldn't mind being beaten—sometimes, and I work hard every day. But I am not married, and Ramalendo has gone to hunt with his fathers in the no-night land."

" Dead, is he ? Never mind, Song, he wasn't the only man in the world, nor yet the best-looking by a long way," rejoined Arthur Poyntz, coughing again and thinking how soon he himself might have also to travel the road that ended in the " no-night land."

" I don't mind about Ramalendo, for he *was* ugly, and he kicked me once," said Song in an outburst of candour, " but it is a disgrace to be tattooed and not married ; the children will make a mock of me, and cry, ' Here comes the half-moon girl,' and the men and women likewise will make merry over me ; and I, the Rajah's daughter ! " The air of pride with which she uttered the last words was funny beyond description, and Arthur Poyntz longed to laugh, yet dared not, through fear of hurting her feelings.

" What was the matter with Ramalendo ? did he catch a fever ? " he asked, thinking that since there was no question

of affection in the matter, it would not hurt her to go into detail.

"Alas, no, the head of Ramalendo has gone to hang in the house of Mahadra Poonan, who bought the young Indra Limbau to be his wife," Song replied with the petulant air of a vexed child.

"Ah, sets the wind in that quarter?" exclaimed the naturalist with a surprised whistle; then he said, "I thought they did not allow liberties of that sort to be taken with people's heads, now?"

"They don't," replied Song, who had finished the first monkey, and was sharpening her knife in readiness for the next, "but Ramalendo was asleep, and beheld not the approach of the foe, otherwise it might have been that Mahadra had lost his own head, instead of gaining another; and I had been plaiting bed mats in the house of my husband," and she sighed regretfully, as she rapidly denuded the next monkey of its skin.

"Where did you come from to-day? Is the Rajah staying in town?" inquired Arthur Poyntz, after another interval spent in wrestling with his cough.

Song nodded, too much engrossed in the delicate operation of getting the monkey's forepaws clear out from the skin to be able to give much attention to anything else.

The naturalist watched her lazily; indolent by nature, the weakness of his condition had made him even less inclined for any exertion, and day by day he had neglected his work, until the accumulated arrears had grown to a serious magnitude. He had flung himself into the one chair the room contained, and in the intervals of coughing, carried on a desultory conversation with the young operator at the skinning-board, whilst outside the open shutter of the window the rain fell with a musical patter into the water below.

"You will come and see me every day now, won't you, Song?" he asked by-and-by, when the work was done, and she was clearing away the *débris* by the simple process of

throwing it out of the window, where the ebbing tide would presently leave it stranded on a mud bank, a horror to all whom bad odours repel.

"Ah, yes, it will be a joy to tend a benefactor so kind; and Song does not forget whose hand it was that drew her from the big death;" and her voice rose in a shrill ecstasy of gratitude.

"So you haven't forgotten that yet," laughed the naturalist. "I thought we had cried quits over that business long ago. Think of the weeks and weeks that I lay a helpless log in your father's house at Limbau, and the trouble you had in helping the Radenajo to nurse me then."

"It was no trouble," murmured Song politely, as she cut monkey-cutlets to be cooked for the naturalist's supper.

"I wonder that lover of yours, Ramalendo, did not secure my head; he had plenty of chances," remarked Arthur Poyntz in a musing tone; but the girl retorted indignantly,

"He would not have dared to commit an outrage so dastardly, and in the house of the Rajah too, for the head of a stranger, who is ignorant of the customs of the country, would ever be safe among my people."

"Another case of 'where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise,' I suppose," he said, then asked Song if she would stay and take supper with him.

"I cannot, this day, for the Rajah will need me, and I must not fail him now, when I am all that cruel death has left to him, or who shall say but that he will buy for himself another wife, to be Radenajo in place of my mother who has died." This she said with an anxious look through the open shutter, in order to determine the time from the dull grey sky, whence the rain dripped steadily, as though with an avowed intention of keeping on.

"And you wouldn't fancy an arrangement of that sort?" asked the naturalist.

"I should hate it, I would not suffer it; a woman who would beat me, who would gibe at me for being tattooed and

not married, and who would not let me plait my father's bed mats, or cook his supper when he returned from hunting —oh, surely a fate so dreadful would never descend like a curse on my head ! ”

“ I'm sure I hope not, seeing you hate the thought of it so much,” returned Arthur Poyntz ; “ but, Song, you must not be surprised if it does, for your father is not an old man, nor has he a son to come after him. Indeed, it is hardly reasonable not to expect him to take another wife.”

“ I know, I know,” she answered, struggling with her tears, “ but it hurts me at the heart to think of it. Have you been married, tuan Poyntz ? ”

The abrupt question took the naturalist by surprise, and he recoiled as though she had struck him a blow ; then, recovering himself by an effort, he laughed nervously as he said, “ I have never had a wife, little Song.”

She stared at him in round-eyed amazement, asking in a pitying tone, “ Were you too poor to keep a wife, or wouldn't they let you marry because you hadn't heads enough ? ”

He laughed again at this, saying a little bitterly, “ We don't reckon a man's fitness to keep a wife in my country by the heads he can cut off, but by the hearts he can win, and I—I wasn't successful, that is all.”

“ Oh,” said Song a little dubiously, then hesitated a moment as though pondering another question, but eventually thought the better of it, and turned down her sleeves in readiness to depart.

“ I saw the man who owns the great diamond, as I brought my boat through the big water-way,” she said just as she was going out through the door.

“ Did you ? The man from the Pontianak do you mean ? ” the naturalist asked eagerly, getting up from his chair and following her towards the door.

She seemed surprised at the interest he displayed, knowing how hard it was to get him to notice things. “ Yes, that

is the man, he was on a Bugis junk. I expect he was going over the sea to Singapore, to sell it."

"Ha, ha," laughed the naturalist in such a sudden outburst of merriment that Song gazed at him in bewilderment, thinking he must have gone mad, the same as people did from sun-stroke.

Arthur Poyntz was laughing and coughing now; between the two he was almost choked, and quite unable to speak, but he pointed with his finger past Song in the direction of the corridor outside, and turning, she saw the man from the Pontianak, standing close beside her.

She gave a little scream of surprise, not having heard him approach, and at the same time instinctively drew her sleeves further down over her wrists, and shrugged her jacket higher up towards her neck, as though to hide the tattooing from the eyes of the stranger.

But he seemed in no way curious, scarcely deigning to even glance at the girl who stood on the threshold and shrank back to let him pass.

Song went down the steps to her boat in a thoughtful mood, wondering, first of all, why the stranger from the Pontianak should be going to see the tuan Poyntz, who had so few friends in Brunei; and then speculating uncomfortably as to her own sensations in the event of her father buying another wife.

But the water-ways were too full of boats for her to have space for undisturbed meditation, while from the house bridges as she passed, many old acquaintances hailed her, with words of welcome, on her return from her six months sojourn in the wilds of Limbau, where she had been with her father and his people.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE DREADED COMES TO PASS.

THE Rajah of Limbau spent his time in hunting in the forests of his own domain, or in the agreeable relaxations of society in Brunei. His predecessors had been men valiant in fight, and of mighty renown in head-hunting, but he was not of this kind, being a man of peace, and disinclined for murder. He had only one wife also, where his social equals had two or three; and though he doubtless gained in domestic peace by this matrimonial abstinence, it secured for him the reputation among his countrymen of being a poor-spirited, miserly sort of fellow, and so his social status suffered.

And now his wife, Song's mother, had died, and he was alone in the world, saving for the girl, whose proposed marriage had come to nought through the untimely decease of the bridegroom. This two-fold disaster was regarded by the wise men of Limbau as a judgment on their ruler's lack of zeal in warfare, and as a rebuke for the afore-mentioned poor-spiritedness. And many had been the solemn discussions held on the question, over the supper fires and evening pipes, during the hunting campaign, when the Rajah was in residence at his big house in the head village of Limbau.

Perhaps some rumours of these conclaves had reached the ears of the great man himself, for he suddenly announced his intention of returning to the city before the rains began, instead of remaining among his own people for a full year, as had been his avowed determination.

Song heard this decision with great delight, she being of a sociable nature and preferring the life of the city to

existence in the forest wilds, where she had to take her share of the hard field work in common with the other women, despite the fact that she was the Rajah's daughter.

Besides all this, she was anxious to renew her acquaintance with the wonderful stranger, who two years before had dragged her, a shrieking child, from the awful jaws of a huge crocodile, himself getting so mauled in the effort, as to lie for weeks in her father's house hovering between life and death.

Since that time, Song had regarded the Englishman with a species of devotion, curiously mixed with pitying patronage, he being the only man she had ever heard of who risked his life to save a girl from death, or who cooked his own supper, and waited on himself.

The naturalist had his headquarters in the gold-worker's house, from whence he made various expeditions into the interior in search of subjects and specimens; but of late these expeditions had grown fewer, until they had ceased entirely, and he was dependent on the kindness of the few friends he had made to supply him with curiosities and strange natural freaks, which no country in the world supplies in such abundance as Borneo.

Of these friends the Rajah of Limbau was one of the staunchest, for, like his daughter, he remembered whose hand it was that rescued her from the jaws of the crocodile on that unlucky day when she went to bathe in the river at the Limbau head village.

When Song returned from her visit to the naturalist she found the women of the household in a great ferment of excitement over a piece of news that had just leaked out. The Rajah was even now in treaty with his kinsman for the hand of young Dewa, the sister of that Indra Limbau who had become the wife of Mahadra. This information was at once given to Song, on the principle that a disagreeable thing is as well got over quickly.

But no one was prepared for the outburst of fury with which she received the tidings, for the Rajah's daughter

possessed a singularly sweet and docile temperament, so that the raging, furious anger she now displayed was all the more surprising.

Luckily for all concerned the Rajah was not at home, but at the house of Paw Limbau, whose daughter he sought in marriage. Hearing that he was not expected until late—that he might even be detained at the house of the Paw until the following day—Song, when the first overwhelming torrent of her passion was a little spent, flung herself into her boat again, in order to hurry with her story to the tuan Poyntz, than whom she knew no better adviser or friend.

There were no light-hearted nods or smiles for acquaintances now, but with a bowed head and firmly compressed lips she sent her boat swiftly up the broad channels, and then round by the narrower water-ways to the gold-worker's house.

It was a considerable distance, and darkness was dropping like a pall over the city by the time she reached her destination, while flaring torches appeared here and there, casting lurid reflections on the black surface of the waters.

The gold-worker's house was brilliantly lighted with petroleum lamps, and the worthy man himself was busily plying his craft, surrounded by his apprentices and workmen.

Song sprang lightly on to the landing at the bottom of the steps, and only staying to make her boat fast, hurried upwards into the house.

The outer room of the naturalist was in darkness, but a gleam of light shone through the partially closed door of the inner apartment, and Song was hurrying towards it, when she caught her foot in some obstacle lying on the floor, and brought herself up with a great noise and clatter against the sharp edge of the skinning-board.

In an instant Arthur Poyntz appeared on the threshold of that inner room, holding a lamp in one hand, whilst from the other, Song caught the gleam of a kriss, a long sinuous-edged dagger.

“Song, is it you? When did you come?” he asked, with

such a sound of relief in his voice that she wondered what brought it there.

"I have but just arrived, and in the darkness I stumbled," she said, ruefully rubbing the arm that had sustained such uncomfortably sharp contact with the board.

Arthur Poyntz carefully closed the door behind him and came towards her, putting his lamp down on the wide board, which still bore traces of the afternoon's work upon it, and taking Song's hand stripped back the loose long sleeve drooping over the wrist.

"Poor child, you have hurt yourself; and how you tremble," he said kindly, seeing a long black bruise on her soft arm.

"Oh, tuan, kind tuan Poyntz, it has all come true," she wailed, breaking out into distressful weeping, and quite regardless of her bruised arm.

"What has come true?" he asked, though shrewdly guessing all the time what the trouble was that had brought her back so quickly.

"My father, it is my father," she gasped between her sobs, "and he is to take in marriage a daughter of the Paw."

Arthur Poyntz gave a start of surprise. "He might have chosen more wisely than that," he muttered, below his breath.

But Song heard him, and flinging back her head, cried hotly, "And that is what I have said to my heart. He might have chosen a wife that should not have added to his daughter's shame. Think what it will mean to me to have Dewa Limbau seated in the place of honour, for is not Dewa own sister to Indra, who is wife to the man who slew Ramalendo?" And in her impotent wrath and indignation the poor child beat the empty air with her fists.

"Never mind, that's an old story by this time, and you owned to me this afternoon that you didn't care for Ramalendo, so perhaps Mahadra did you a good turn; who shall say?" replied the naturalist, secretly anxious for Song to be gone, yet hardly liking to dismiss her.

"You have been always a kind friend to me," said the girl, looking up into his face with the air of a trusting child, her eyes all swollen and dimmed with weeping, and great sobs still catching her breath. "Will you do one thing for me to save me from the shame that is about to overwhelm me in the house of my father?"

"What is that?" he asked gravely.

Song lowered her eyes, hanging her head in modest confusion, and thinking that the task she had set herself was harder than in the distance it had appeared to be.

"I would serve you so faithfully, and work day and night in preparing the skins and stuffing them; I would cook your suppers and clean your rooms, if only you would ask of my father to marry me."

"Song, dear little Song, you must not say words like these to me," he exclaimed in a tone of distress. "You are young, and bright, and blooming; this trouble will pass, or you will get used to it, or marry some one of your own age and degree. Whilst I—oh, Song, where are your eyes, that you cannot see it? A few months at the most, or it may be only a question of weeks and days, and I shall have gone to the no-night land."

"But you are not very bad, you only cough, and are tired," she urged, refusing to see that to which she desired to be blind.

"I am dying, that is all; and I don't think the business will take much longer now," he said, with a certain repressed grimness in his tone.

"Ah, it is woe, woe, turn where you will. There is no joy left in life, and therefore I will die too," she said in determined despair, compressing her lips firmly, and looking at the moment quite capable of carrying out her suicidal project.

"No, you won't!" he retorted, twisting her round by her shoulders, so that she stood confronting him. "You will go back at once to your father's house, and to-morrow you will come here to me again, for I have that to be

done which no hand but yours can do. Now, Song, dear child, go!" His tone was commanding, his manner inflexible, and used as she had always been to implicit obedience, she turned without another protest, and went back along the corridor, and down the steps to her boat.

Arthur Poyntz followed her softly, keeping always in the shadow, and only fearful lest his cough should break out and betray his nearness to her. But for once it was obliging, and did not disturb him, as he watched her descend the steps and, getting into her boat, glide swiftly away into the darkness. No fear of her being molested on the journey troubled him, for Song, with her indomitable pluck and pride, was well capable of holding her own ; and her position as the daughter of a Rajah would also safeguard her ; swift retribution being dealt out to all who meddle with those standing in high places ; except indeed in such a case as head - hunting, wherein it is every one for himself.

When she had disappeared, he walked back to his rooms, but paused once to steady himself against the wall, whilst that torturing cough broke forth afresh, and hacked and hewed at the frail tabernacle of his body, as though about to destroy it on the spot. But the fit passed, and after a moment spent in regaining his breath, he was able to reach his room, where this time he took the precaution of barring the outer door against the intrusion of any more visitors.

Within the other chamber, which served the naturalist for a sleeping apartment, a man was waiting, the same individual who surprised Song in the afternoon—the lucky owner of the big diamond from the Pontianak river.

"The girl has gone?" he asked impatiently, frowning a little, for he was in a hurry.

"Yes, she has gone," replied Arthur Poyntz, panting still from his recent fit of coughing, and wiping the bead-like drops of perspiration from his brow.

"And you will consent to take it, to guard it for me,

until I can return to claim it?" asked the man eagerly, his voice dropping to a whisper as he edged closer to his host.

"Man, have you counted the cost?" demanded Arthur Poyntz abruptly. "I may be dead before you return, and what will become of your——?"

"Oh, mention it not, lest the walls have ears!" broke in the visitor in a tone of distraction. "I will take the risk of your dying, kind stranger, if only you will help me out of my terrible fix."

The naturalist made an impatient gesture, as though anxious to be quit of the whole business; then he said, "I can't imagine why it is you should have elected to trust me, a man like yourself, liable to fall into temptation."

"But you are English—no Englishman ever betrays a trust," retorted the man with such confidence in his statement as caused his listener to groan inwardly as he thought of some Englishmen he had known, and how far short they would fall if measured by this barbarian's standard. He did not put these reflections into speech, however; being, despite his unwillingness, secretly flattered by the stranger's good opinion of his country and people, and anxious in his own person to emphasize the same.

"I will do my best for you," was what he did say, "and certainly I do not think that any one would look for treasure here; folks don't as a rule accredit me with brains enough for money-getting. When will you return for it?"

"In a few days, or failing that, in the wane of the next moon; but be the time long or short, tuan Poyntz, I have no fear for my treasure whilst it is guarded by you."

"Much obliged, I'm sure," replied the naturalist, trying not to look too pleased at this compliment.

And then the stranger drew a small leathern bag from his bosom, dropping it on to the other's palm, whose fingers closed over it with a nervous clutch, for the famous diamond was enshrined within that bag, and on Arthur Poyntz a mighty responsibility had descended.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH BY VIOLENCE.

THE next day, Arthur Poyntz had a slight hemorrhage, which, though not actually much in itself, yet in his weak condition made him so ill that he could not get up, and was forced to remain lying on the pile of rattan-plaited mats, called in Bornean courtesy a bed.

The gold-worker's wife came in to look after him, holding up her hands and exclaiming in shrill ejaculations concerning his altered looks, until he was forced in self-defence to drive her away, whereupon she fetched a Chinese man-of-medicine who lived near, and insisted on his prescribing for her sick lodger.

The medico, a skinny individual in very baggy nether-garments, with a wizened, yellow face and a rasping voice, had more acquaintance with the healing art than many of his brethren, and gave the English stranger a soothing draught, which allayed for a time the terrible cough, and enabled the sufferer to get a few hours of refreshing sleep.

When he awoke, late in the afternoon, his first thought was of Song, but she had not been, the good woman of the house informed him. No visitors at all had come to the house, saving Tsing Bang, the Chinese doctor, who had slipped in to see how his drug worked.

With this the sick man was satisfied, his one fear having been lest Song had come and gone whilst he slumbered; and in his fatherly pity for the Rajah's distressed little daughter, he would have been really troubled had she come to him for comfort and gone away unconsoled.

"She will come later on," he thought, and then, struggling to rise, dragged himself to his writing table, and tried to go on with his work on "The Beasts and Birds of Borneo," which he fondly hoped would make his name famous after he was dead and buried in the land about which he wrote so enthusiastically.

But a fit of bitter home-sickness was upon him to-day, and his thoughts went back to the home of his boyhood, and to his mother who had died when he was quite a child, leaving to him, her first-born, the seeds of that fell disease which had sent her untimely to the grave. From his mother, as was natural, his thoughts went to his father, the stern old man who still lived and ruled his dependents with a rod of iron. That home of his childhood and young manhood had not been a very happy one, but viewed now, through the softening mist of the intervening years, it seemed a very haven of rest and blessedness, so that the heart of the world-weary man turned faint and sick with the yearning to repose once more within its shelter. The doors of that home, however, had been ruthlessly closed upon him long since, and henceforth he must be a wanderer until he died. It was not often he thought of it, still less often that any yearning to return came over him; but on this night, weak and suffering as he was, the desire and the home-sickness raged unchecked.

Plainly it was of no use to discourse on the charms of a foreign land to-night, when it was the scent of the Kentish hop-oasts that came most vividly to his mind, or the swish of the scythes, as the men mowed barley on the lower slopes of Swarling Downs. And pushing away his manuscript and the voluminous heaps of notes he had gathered in his researches, Arthur Poyntz took out his diary and began a fresh entry in that. His pen flew now, and he forgot his loneliness, his sore sickness, the swift on-marching of the grim enemy of our race; everything waned before the interest of his occupation. This diary had been commenced soon after the more serious symptoms of his illness began to show themselves, and was

intended for his father, when he, the son, should be dead and gone.

Time passed quickly, absorbed as he was, and he forgot to look for Song, or to wonder at her non-appearance, though it was sufficiently surprising that she had not come according to her promise.

It was raining harder than ever when late that night the gold-worker's wife came in to see how the invalid fared before retiring to rest herself. She was a garrulous soul, and loved to talk when a listener could be found, and plunged eagerly now into details of a murder committed late on the previous night, or early in the morning. The story called for much gesticulation and many ejaculations of horror; but Arthur Poyntz paid no heed to it, murders in Brunei being so common as to lack the power of causing him to shiver even, and after his long stooping over his desk he was weak and giddy, almost dazed, and desired nothing so much as to be left to himself.

He slept only fitfully that night; the fact of having a diamond so valuable in his possession was unnerving, and moreover he had remembered Song, and spent some time in wondering why she had not come according to her promise. When he did sleep his dreams were frightful, so that on the whole he preferred to be awake, listening to the monotonous patter of the rain outside, and the occasional hoot of an owl.

Towards morning he fell into a sounder, more restful slumber; but from this after a time he was disturbed by the sobbing of some one, and started from his pillow in a fright, to find Song standing on the threshold of his chamber, and crying as if her heart would break.

"Song," he called feebly, and even then in the bewilderment of his waking, he had time to note how exceedingly weak his voice sounded, "Song, what is the matter?"

For answer she came a little closer inside the room, and tumbled in a distressed heap on the floor, where she wailed yet more dolefully than before.

"Song, I wish you would speak. I am too weak and ill to rise and come to you, and this grief of yours distresses me keenly," said he, with a pained irritation that was quick to take effect on Song.

"I did not mean to trouble you, oh, tuan most kind," she said, scrambling to a sitting posture, and rubbing her wet eyes with the back of her hand, "but my sorrow is great, more great than I can bear, and the heart of me seems like to burst with the misery of it!"

"What, has your father brought the lovely Dewa home so soon?" asked the invalid in surprise, for though, as he well knew, marriage with the Borneans was not much more than the buying and selling of cattle, nevertheless, in the case of a highly-placed personage like the Rajah of Limbau, a certain amount of feasting and merry-making would accompany the barter, and such festivities take time.

"Not that. Dewa seems a little trouble beside this. Do you know, tuan, that last night, not the one that has just gone, but the night before, I myself saw a man slain, and it was my tongue that betrayed him."

"What do you mean?" Arthur Poyntz asked, puzzled by her terrible agitation as well as by her words, which last, owing to their wildness, he was disposed to attribute to delirium.

"Do you remember that the man from the Pontianak came here just as I was going away that other day?" Song asked, coming a little closer to the sick man's side, and sinking her voice to a whisper.

Arthur Poyntz nodded, but his heart was beginning to beat thick and fast with the intuition of what was coming.

"Ah, he little thought, and I little thought, how much hung on that meeting! When I got home, as you know, the women told me of my father's intention to take a wife, and I hurried back to you, but you were anxious that I should not stay. You kept looking round to the door of this room, and bidding me come again on the morrow. And I thought, as I

rowed my boat home, that it was because that man from the Pontianak was still here with you. When I reached my father's lodgings I found that he had returned, bringing the Paw with him. They were standing on the jambattan (landing-stage) talking, and when I got out of my boat my father said to the Paw, 'You are too late now, for the man has gone to Singapore in a Bugis junk, I am told, in order to dispose of the diamond there.' Then, without a moment's thought, I spoke, saying how I had met him here, and believed that he was still with you."

"What then?" demanded Arthur Poyntz with panting breath, for Song had broken into another burst of weeping, thus becoming inarticulate.

"The Paw gave a shout of delight, a dreadful sound such as a wild beast makes when it seizes its prey, and springing into my boat he rowed quickly away. My father turned to me when he was gone, saying sharply that I had better learn wisdom to keep my tongue still when it was best to be silent, and that my words had doubtless slain a man. I begged him to tell me what he meant, and then he spoke again, saying there was a plot to kill the man and secure the diamond, that the Paw was the prime mover in it, and that now doubtless it would be carried out, for it would be easy to track the man down if he were still in Brunei."

"And the Rajah, did he lend a hand in a plot so foul?" demanded Arthur Poyntz in a horrified tone, he having deemed Song's father a most humane man, and one who would not stoop to assassination.

She shook her head. "You know my father, tuan, and that he is a man of peace; but though he would not help on a scheme like this, neither would he cry out against it, lest he should offend the Paw, and so make strife between them."

"Did he stand by and see it done?" cried the invalid, indignation and wrath struggling in his voice.

"No, no," said the girl, "it was I who saw, but no one knew I was there; I could not rest in the house knowing

what was going forward ; and slipping away in the darkness, I wandered down that strip of rocky ground behind the house, and there——”

“ Well ? ” demanded her listener sternly.

“ Oh, ask me not to speak of it ; it was dreadful, dreadful. I saw a little fawn once crushed by a boa-constrictor, and I cried and was sick with the horror of it. But this—oh, I could not cry ; the fount of my tears was dried within me : and I had to see it, for I could not get away without betraying myself ; ” and again Song broke down, sobbing violently.

“ Did they find the diamond ? ” inquired the sick man in a curious tone.

“ I do not know. I swooned at the end, and when I knew myself again, they had all gone save *it*, and the dawn was breaking.”

“ Poor little Song,” murmured the man compassionately, and then he lay silent for a spell, thinking deeply.

It was Song who spoke next, timid apology now taking the place of active grief, “ You needed me to do something for you, that you could not do yourself ? ” she asked.

“ Not quite that,” he replied, forcing a smile on his face, which before had been grave and overcast. “ I said I wanted you to do something, to help me in work no one else could do so well, but it was only to get those skins ready to be sent home to England. Shall we begin on them this morning ? ”

“ As you please, tuan Poyntz, I have nothing to hold me to-day, no one wants me at all,” she added with a catching sob.

“ Go out yonder,” said he, “ and begin on them, will you ? and I will slip on a few more things and come and help you ; ” but he broke into such a lamentable fit of coughing that Song remained standing near him, afraid to go.

“ Don’t look so scared, child, I am not dead yet,” he gasped, when he had managed to get back enough breath to speak again.

Song slipped away then to the outer chamber, where various skins lay about in different stages of preparation; there was much waiting to be done, however, and some really valuable specimens were spoiling for want of attention; to these she turned first, rubbing briskly as she had seen the naturalist do, and endeavouring to repair as much as possible the ravages of neglect.

Arthur Poyntz found her thus engaged when, half-an-hour later, he emerged weak and trembling from his room. She had a happy smile on her piquant little face, and was even crooning a lullaby learned long ago from her mother; so quick is childhood to forget, and in heart, Song was still a child.

Rallying her on her quick recovery from violent grief and despair Arthur Poyntz called her to help him with a particularly hideous specimen of the monkey tribe, a small black ape, with a pathetically human face, but with a shiny bald head and straggling grey beard, its features twisted into a savage grin, as it leered at the two operators.

An idea had come to Arthur Poyntz, and this work among the specimens was for the purpose of carrying it out. Presently he sent Song away on some trivial errand, and in her absence brought from an inner pocket of his flannel jacket the leathern bag with the big diamond, which, with trembling fingers, he wedged high up in the neck of the black ape, hurrying to hide it more securely with the mixture of cotton waste and wadding with which he padded out the skins of his specimens.

By the time Song returned, the black ape had reached such a state of completion as to be sitting on the skinning board, one small black hand grasping a crotch of wood, as though for support, whilst in the other it held a tiny fragment of looking-glass, in which it appeared to gaze in comical amazement at its own reflection.

The pose was perfect, and the naturalist lounging in his chair smoking seemed to be regarding it critically, although

in point of fact his heart was beating apprehensively as he wondered whether the dead ape would guard well the secret hidden in its neck.

He could do no more work that day, strength and energy alike being spent, and for a time he sat idly watching his young assistant, whilst he thought his own thoughts and speculated vaguely on the future. That man from the Pontianak who had been done to death through the greed of the Paw Limbau, was without friends or kin in all the wide world ; he had himself said so when committing his treasure to the keeping of the English stranger, saying in his quavering, frightened voice, "If I fall, tuan, you can keep the diamond for yourself ; there is no one else to claim it."

And he had fallen. Arthur Poyntz was thinking it out, between the slow whiffs of his pipe, as he watched Song at her work. The tragedy of the other night had made a rich man of him, only the irony of it was that it came too late, for what could a dying man want with the riches of the world he was leaving ? It was strange that the owner of the diamond should have fixed on him as custodian of his treasure. Strange, but not remarkable, for three years before Arthur Poyntz had himself been a wanderer in the diamond districts of the Pontianak, and had one day found a man dying of hunger, and promptly shared his own scanty supper with him. It was the same man who afterwards found the big diamond, and from a beggar became the possessor of more wealth than he could fairly realise. But it had not been an unmitigated blessing : wherever he wandered the reputation of the diamond had followed him, and treachery lurked in its wake. So it was that, discovering in the naturalist his good Samaritan of three years before, the harassed man turned at once to him as a friend indeed.

The big diamond belonging to the Rajah of Sandag was reputed to be worth a sum running into six figures of English money, therefore this one that had come into his possession, Arthur Poyntz argued, must be at the very least worth fifty

or sixty thousand pounds, and the bare idea of it caused him to sigh heavily.

"Are you more ill, or tired?" asked Song gently, a grave expression flitting over her face, for now that his little burst of energy was over, the invalid looked more feeble than ever.

"I am thinking," he replied abstractedly; then rousing himself he said in a brisker tone, "Put up that work, Song, we'll do no more to-day; but you can come again to-morrow if you choose."

She put aside the things with the wistful obedience always given to his commands, and then lingered a little before departing.

"I wish I might stay and tend you in the dark night, when no one is near to hear you cough?" she pleaded, the honest affection of her heart shining out through her eyes.

He smiled up at her from his chair. "It wouldn't do, Song; there is a Mrs. Grundy stalking about even here in Brunei, and she'd have her teeth into you in no time," he said, shaking his head.

"Who is she then, this woman who bites; I know her not?" inquired Song, opening her eyes widely at this information.

Arthur Poyntz laughed aloud at this innocent query. "She is a paradox, my dear child; a myth, yet a substantial reality, and you will do well to avoid her. But seriously there is nothing to worry about. Tsing Bang gives me a week or two longer yet, and when the time draws nigh I will be sure to tell you, for I should like to have your little hand in mine when I finally make my bow to the world at large," he said lightly. And choking back a rising sob, Song went away at his bidding.

Again, as on the previous night, the fierce fever of bitter home-sickness seized on him when darkness fell, and the strength of his yearning grew until it became an agony, intolerable to be borne.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE QUIET NIGHT.

THE gold-worker's private apartments and the rooms where he kept his stock-in-trade were well guarded from fear of unwarrantable intrusion during the hours of darkness, but that part of the premises tenanted by other people was largely left to take care of itself, nothing worth stealing being supposed to exist there.

And, indeed, as a rule there was not much to repay the labour of carrying away. No one wanted to steal stuffed monkeys in a land that abounded with live ones, whilst snake skins were not worth the effort of looting, even had there been no risk of detection behind. Indeed, despite the fact that he was in the midst of thieves and robbers, the naturalist rarely fastened his doors at night, knowing well that if any one was minded to rob him bolts and bars would prove but slight impediments to the process, as a sharp, stout knife would soon make a highway for its possessor through any of the four walls of his rooms.

On this night a kind of panic was upon him to barricade himself within his chamber, but he wisely put it from him, and even paid less heed than usual to the fact that the outer door was not merely unfastened but ajar, and the inner one closed only by its wooden latch.

Tsing Bang came to see his patient in the evening, and the gold-worker's wife also looked in to make sure that her lodger needed nothing before retiring to her own rest, and when they had gone Arthur Poyntz was left alone to meet his fate.

He was ordinarily a man of iron nerve, but, weakened by disease, he trembled at the prospect the night held for him.

He knew it was inevitable too, that horror that menaced him. For when the Paw and his associates in villainy failed to find the diamond on the body of the man they had killed, the next thing they would do would be to look for it elsewhere.

If they were desperate, probably they would kill him also, and it was curious, dying man though he was, how he clung to the small remainder of life left to him, even though it daily became a heavier burden to be borne.

But cowardice would avail him nothing, as he well knew, and therefore plucking up the remnants of his courage he laid down on his mat bed and faced the worst.

It was in the darkest part of the night, when there was absolutely nothing to be heard but the patter of the rain and the distant echoes of a frog concert in the reed beds half-a-mile away, that he became conscious of something living in his vicinity. He did not start or move an eyelid; his cough he could not repress, though happily it did not trouble him much, and the something, whatever it was, crept nearer and nearer.

The perspiration gathered in great drops on his forehead; every moment he expected to feel a hand laid on him, and to catch the gleam of a kriss pointed to his heart.

But the minutes passed one by one, and his watch ticking under his pillow was the only sound in the room, for that silent movement which had frightened him so much was scarcely more than a sensation yet.

Oh, the agony of that waiting! His cough broke out violently under the strain of it, whilst his hair seemed to stand stiff and straight on his head with the horror of lying still, unable to strike one blow in self-defence.

The movement was more audible now; some one was stirring in the outer room, a chair was moved, as though

carelessly thrust aside, and a moment later there came a crash as of crockery or glass thrown down.

"Who's there?" shouted the naturalist, thinking he might as well make some sort of a stir, since the intruder seemed to be so destructively inclined.

To this no answer was returned, and gathering courage from the silence, Arthur Poyntz got out of bed, or rather up from the heap of mats on the floor, and striking a light, looked round for his visitor. No one was visible, however, and taking his lamp in one hand and revolver in the other, he cautiously approached the door between the two rooms, which was shut, but not fastened.

To open the door he must free one hand, and not willing to lay his revolver aside even for a moment, he had no choice but to put the lamp down instead. Standing it on the floor in such a position as would throw most light on the scene, he next applied himself gently to the door, which opened outwards. It would not stir, however, and so he sat down to wait, not for a moment doubting that the thief or thieves, overhauling the next room, would as soon as they were ready carry the search into this chamber also, in which case he was fully prepared to meet them one by one as they entered.

But the minutes ticked themselves away and lengthened into hours, yet no further sound reached his ears from behind the door. Once or twice he addressed a remark to the unknown, which he deemed suitable to the occasion, and warned them as to what awaited them in case they were so foolhardy as to attempt to enter the inner room, but no answer was returned; and he was unable to decide whether the intruders had found and departed with what they came to seek, or whether they were keeping silent in order presently to rush upon him unawares.

After a long, long vigil, a gleam of light showed in the darkness of the night sky, sounds of renewed life and movement crept in from the outside world, and Arthur Poyntz knew that morning had come again, realising with a thrill of

joy that he was alive to see it, despite the menace of the night.

Then he tried the door again, but still it would not yield, and not choosing to exert any very vigorous efforts to get it open, he waited for some one to come in from the outside, knowing well that the gold-worker's wife would not let much of the morning pass before coming to see how it fared with him.

Nor was he mistaken; presently there came a sound of talking, the outer door was pushed wider open—it had a trick of catching against the floor, and grinding on a knot in the boards—then arose terrified shrieks in feminine voices, followed by sounds of hasty retreat.

This puzzled him somewhat, and he speculated on what there could be in the other room to so frighten the woman. Then he heard quite a number of people coming, the gold-worker's voice shouting to the others to stand clear and give him room, while they shouted back to encourage him in some deed of valour.

They were making too much noise to hear the questions that the naturalist was trying to shout from his side of the door; but after a time it was pulled open, and quite a crowd of gesticulating and jabbering neighbours pressed in to know how he fared.

His midnight visitor was a big yellow and black snake, and when Arthur Poyntz saw it he knew at once why it had come.

It was the mate of the one Song had brought to him, which had been killed by the Rajah's servants two days' journey away up the river. But the widowed survivor, with nothing to guide it but its unerring God-given instinct, had followed after as fast as it could travel. No one could say how it got into the house, but there it was in the workroom of the naturalist, whilst the broken glass of the case where the skin of its former companion had been placed testified to its goal having been reached.

The gold-worker had killed it with his sumpitan, or blow-pipe, the poisoned arrow having pierced its head, and it lay motionless now beside the skin of its lost mate. Overcome by grief or fatigue, the reptile had coiled itself in a heap against the door of the inner room, thus effectually barricading the naturalist against the consequences of an unwary entrance to the room.

He drew a deep breath of relief, not unmixed with awe, as he took in the situation. The black ape crouched on the table looking at its ugly face in the glass, so that the treasure was safe still, and what was more reassuring than this, even, was the certainty that the Paw's suspicions had not fallen on him; otherwise the night had brought him more visitors than the bereaved snake, who perhaps had not left him so completely unmolested and unharmed.

It was a considerable time before the curiosity of the neighbours was entirely satisfied on the subject of the naturalist's strange guest, and after entertaining them for a while with anecdotes of similar instances of fidelity among snakes, Arthur Poyntz showed them all his strange collection, going over each object with a loving pride, lingering over the details, knowing all the time that he would probably not live to act as showman again.

Perhaps the kindly neighbours possessed the same idea, for two women whom Song had seen fighting in the house a short time before had tears running down their cheeks as they went back to their own quarters, the sick man being very popular in the house of the gold-worker.

It was past noon when Song arrived; a dull, wet day, but with an overpowering steamy heat as though nature were endeavouring to see what she could do in emulation of a bronchitis kettle.

The naturalist, with a brilliant hectic spot on either cheek, was writing in the inner room; he welcomed the Rajah's daughter with a smile, asking if she had heard of his visitor of the previous night.

"Of the snake?" she asked, returning his smile. "Ah, yes, tuan Poyntz, and my father who himself comes to see you to-day will be sorry for the danger so nearly brought to you by his hand." This she said standing before him spick and span in festal array, her long black hair dripping with grease and skewered into a pyramid with big silver pins, whilst a great bunch of brass ornaments dangled from either ear, making a tinkling sound with every movement of her head.

"I am making my will, Song," he said, coughing, and having to jerk out his words between the spasms.

"What is a will?" she demanded, drawing near to look at the white paper covered with black marks, over which the tuan was so fond of poring.

"A will is to say in writing what you wish done with your property after you are dead," he said with the air of a pedagogue.

"But when you are dead property is yours no longer," she objected, testamentary law being unknown among her people.

"No, it is certainly yours no longer, as you say, and yet the queer nation among whom I was born always let the dead man have a say in the disposing of his property; funny, isn't it, Song?"

She nodded her head in an amused fashion, and waited for more information before venturing a verbal opinion on the subject.

"So, to be like the rest of my people, I have made my will; and when I am dead you must keep it for me, Song."

"What shall I do with it?" she asked doubtfully; "it is not good to eat."

"No, hardly, paper being highly indigestible, I should say," he answered gravely. "But some day, it may be, some of my people will come to Borneo, and then you will give them this paper, saying that it is the will of the tuan Poyntz, who died in Brunei of the bad cough."

IN THE QUIET NIGHT.

"Give it to me, I will take it," she said, holding out her hand, though there was the odd little break in her voice that told of a sob choked back.

"Stay, it is not ready yet; my people pay no heed to documents of this kind unless they are witnessed by somebody else. Go, child, and summon hither that master of potion and pill, Dr. Tsing Bang, and bring also the gold-worker; a right good fellow such as he is will not begrudge me a few moments of valuable time, of that I am sure, so hurry away, Song, and let us get the business over."

He leaned back in his chair when she had gone, sighing heavily. He dared not die without giving some hint as to the whereabouts of the diamond, and his care was to so separate the article and the hint, as to make it difficult for the wrong person to gain any advantage therefrom. Thus he had decided to make Song the unconscious custodian of the explanation, whilst the diamond itself would be sent to Europe with the rest of his specimens.

It was not long before she returned with the two men, to whom the naturalist explained his need of their presence, and asked for their signatures. At this, Tsing Bang wrote a sprawling hieroglyphic or two; but the gold-worker, with much frowning and many facial contortions, skilfully sketched on the paper a pair of small pincers and a tiny file, which were the chief tools used in his craft, and in consequence availed him as signature on those rare occasions when it seemed to him necessary to append his name to anything.

These formalities having been gone through, and a few compliments interchanged, the gold-worker and Tsing Bang took their departure, and Song and the sick man were once more alone.

"There, my child," he said, as he sealed the document in a strong envelope, "now where will you keep this pretty thing?"

For answer she drew a small bag from the front of her sarong, a bag made of snake skin, and skilfully embroidered

with threads of the finest rattan. "It will be safe here, tuan Poyntz," she said, holding it towards him.

Folding the envelope once across, he slipped it in the little skin bag, giving it back to her in silence.

"What is the work for to-day?" she asked after a time, when for her at least the silence had grown oppressive.

"Nothing, I think," he said slowly, as though weighing each word as it fell; then, with still more deliberation, he put a question in his turn: "Song, where has the Paw gone?"

It was a random guess on his part that the Paw had gone a journey at all, but it proved a right one.

"Ah, you have heard of it," she breathed in a low, frightened whisper. "It is thought that the man from the Pontianak sent the diamond to Singapore, and the Paw has gone to search for it there."

Arthur Poyntz drew a deep breath of relief, for a huge load of apprehension slipped from his shoulders at her words, showing as they did how wide of the mark the Paw's suspicions had strayed.

He would sleep in peace to-night, and wake with renewed courage to face his losing battle with death next day. He might even gather fresh strength from the respite, he told himself; but this was not to be. Before night fell another attack of hemorrhage came on, and when it ceased, both he and those about him realised that his little span of life had dwindled now to a few short hours.

Tsing Bang, hastily summoned, had come again, and with the gold-worker's wife hovered helplessly about the dying man. But the Rajah's little daughter crouched on the floor by the low mat bed, and herself wiped the death dew from his brow; and Arthur Poyntz had his wish, for when he passed from life into the mystery of the Great Hereafter, it was Song, the half-moon girl, who held his hand and smoothed his passage thither.

CHAPTER V.

HESTER.

OLD Stephen Poyntz was dead, and the world—his little world of Welbury—would know him no more.

There were very few who grieved for him, or even regretted that he was gone. A stern father, a hard master, an unsociable neighbour, little wonder that the mourning at his funeral was merely a matter of form.

George Poyntz, his son, declared openly that the old man's death was a relief, since now he—George—would come to his own, or what he deemed ought to be his own, and reign at Swarling Tower in place of his father. A good, obedient son was George Poyntz, so the world said, staying at home and working on the farm, getting barely more than a ploughman's wage, with which to support his wife and family. But George was perhaps not so disinterested as he appeared, and knowing that his father could not live for ever, had lingered on, bearing abuse and working like a slave, in the hope that when at length the old man's death should take place he might reap the reward of his patient servitude.

He was not the eldest son, Arthur, the wanderer, being old Stephen's first-born ; but Arthur had been thrust out and disowned these many years past, and George had scanty fears concerning his claim on the estate ; his only anxiety in the matter of his father's testamentary arrangements being with regard to Hester Dayrell.

A slip of a girl was Hester at the time of her grandfather's death, the one being in the wide world on whom the old man lavished affection, or who was permitted the privilege

of lavishing it back again. She ruled the old man, the house servants, and the workpeople by the force of her imperious young will, and it was only her Uncle George who revolted from the thraldom, and refused to be governed by her.

A spoilt child was Hester, as any girl would naturally be who, having lost her mother young, had been allowed to do exactly as she pleased ever since. But she was sweet and lovable in spite of the spoiling, and her faults were more of the head than the heart. Her love for her crusty old grandfather was deep and sincere; and his death was a bitter sorrow and bereavement for her.

She was too unwell to go to the funeral, and watched the starting of the dismal procession from behind the closed blinds of her own little bedroom on the top floor, and then when the last carriage wound out of sight round the corner of the hop-oasts, she went slowly downstairs to sit in the big drawing-room with Mrs. George Poyntz, and await the return of the others from the funeral.

A large fire relieved the sombre gloom of the drawing-room, and sitting by it, clad in her new mourning, was Mrs. George Poyntz. She was a gentle, sweet-looking woman, not a strong character by any means, but one who would make friends, and keep them, and Hester loved her as warmly as she hated her husband.

"Come to the fire, Hester; it does not seem so miserable in front of this big blaze," she said, holding out her hand to the girl.

Hester came slowly forward; she looked pinched and shivering, though, seeing that September was not yet out, and the sun was shining brightly, it was more due to sorrow than cold.

"I don't think a fire will make much difference, Aunt Alice," she said brokenly, but she crouched down before it all the same, sitting on the fender stool, and leaning her head against her aunt's black gown.

Mrs. Poyntz patted the girl's shining hair with a nervous

hand. "You must not grieve too much, dear ; he was an old man, you know, and could not expect to live much longer ; better that he should be taken away now, than linger on until he became helpless, and a weariness to every one."

"He would never have been a weariness to me, poor, dear old granfer," she said, a little rain of tears dropping on to her crêpe, and considerably damaging it.

"No, no, I am sure of it," went on Mrs. George Poyntz, more nervously than before. "But circumstances might have changed ; you might not have been able to stay with him, or you might have died ;" and she sighed, feeling that her task of consoler was one decidedly beyond her powers ; and wondering anxiously, poor soul, what her boys and girls at home were doing in her absence, for they were a racketty, irresponsible set, and not to be trusted long to follow their own devices.

Hester Dayrell sat silent, her head still resting against her aunt's gown. She did not want to talk, or to be talked to, and yet the sense of companionship was very sweet and soothing to her.

As she sat there, with bowed head, she was speculating on the future—her future, and what it might hold for her. And, naturally enough, her companion's thoughts had taken the same direction, and poor Mrs. George was peeping furtively about at the big gloomy room, and wondering whether by this time to-morrow she would be able to regard it in the light of personal property. The small cottage in which they lived in Welbury village was cruelly inadequate to the needs of her growing family, and thinking of it all, and the uncertainty as to how the old man had left his property, caused her to sigh impatiently, almost fretfully.

"Auntie, was I leaning too heavily ?" Hester asked, aroused by that sigh, and sitting up with a little jerk.

"No, dear, I was only worrying a little, and wondering about the children. I don't like leaving them long alone, they get into so much mischief."

"You should have brought them, it would not have mattered now —," and Hester broke off abruptly, her eyes filling with tears again. In her grandfather's time Mrs. George had not been allowed to bring her boys and girls to Swarling Tower, except upon very rare occasions.

"I thought of that, dear, and asked your uncle to let me bring Willie and Flossie—they might have been sent into the kitchen with Jane and Susan—but he wouldn't hear of it, and told me to have old Mrs. Uden in to take care of them."

"And did you?" asked Hester, the suspicion of a smile just coming on to her face and fading again.

"Yes, but she cannot keep them in order, you know. Why, the last time I had her to mind house, Steve and Allie shut her up in the cupboard in my bedroom, and would not let her out until I got home again."

"Serve her right, too, a meddlesome, prying old creature like that. What business had she to be in the cupboard in your bedroom at all? Allie told me that she found her there, poking among your things," retorted Hester, with a note of rising indignation in her tone.

"There was nothing there that I should object to her seeing, but it was naughty of Steve and Allie, for Willie and Flossie might have got into no end of mischief," said the harassed mother with another sigh, and then she patted the folds of her new gown with nervous, trembling fingers, for there was a grating of carriage wheels on the gravel outside, the first intimation of the return of the funeral party.

Hester rose from her seat hurriedly, and stood pale and defiant waiting to know her fate.

The occupants of the three mourning coaches came trooping into the room, George Poyntz first, nervous like his wife just now with his future still a matter of speculation and doubt. Following him were one or two old men, neighbours of Stephen who had come to show him the last tokens of respect; the vicar, the doctor, Professor Pringle from the Stourbridge Museum, and lastly, the family lawyer.

The vicar came to Hester, shaking hands with her, and inquiring after her health in his kind, fatherly manner, but the others she had seen before they started for the funeral, and no more greetings were necessary. So, with the defiant look still lingering on her face, she crept closer to Professor Pringle, he of all the assembled company having the greatest amount of her liking and esteem, her Aunt Alice of course excepted.

Little time was wasted on preliminaries; the gentlemen gathered about the round table in the centre of the room, Mrs. George retaining her seat by the fire, and Hester standing straight and tall behind the little Professor.

Then the lawyer produced a tin box, which, placing on the table, he unlocked, and opening it took out the envelope containing the will, with a few letters and papers, some yellow with age, others of more recent date. At sight of these documents the face of George Poyntz grew overcast, almost frightened in expression, for he immediately recognised the handwriting of his brother Arthur, the wanderer, and opined but little good to himself from the fact that the old man, his father, had secretly cherished these letters, though outwardly disowning and scorning the writer.

But the lawyer had broken the seals, and had begun to read, and, leaning a little forward, George bent his mind to gathering the sense of the words falling from the lawyer's lips, though the strain of his nervous apprehension made him almost incapable of comprehension, and the room, the people in it, and everything, himself included, appeared to be whirling round in a chaotic dance of confusion.

Disentangled from the lumbering legal phraseology, the provisions of the will were simple enough, although to George Poyntz they appeared singularly cruel and unjust. The Swarling Tower estate was left to Arthur, the first-born, with an injunction to cease his wanderings in foreign lands and settle down on his ancestral acres. But, if it should be found that Arthur Poyntz had pre-deceased his father,

the property was to go to Hester Dayrell, her Uncle George to reside at the Tower, and manage the estate for her until she came of age. To George himself were left a few odds and ends of property, such as a cottage here, a few fields yonder, and one or two patches of woodland, which, though contiguous to the estate, were not really a part of it; besides this, he was also to have the money that might be lying in the bank at the time of his father's death, and this, the lawyer stated, would probably amount to eight or nine hundred pounds, after the funeral expenses and servants' wages had been deducted therefrom.

George Poyntz turned pale, but, setting his teeth hard, as though to hide his bitter disappointment from the eyes of curious onlookers, he asked, "What is the date of the will?"

"Seven years ago, seven years last June," the lawyer said, looking down on the paper and then across at his questioner.

Seven years. That was the summer that a consignment of foreign curiosities had reached the Stourbridge Museum, collected and sent by the wanderer Arthur Poyntz. George remembered it only too well, and his old father's surreptitious visits to the town to inspect the collection. But it was so long ago, and Stephen Poyntz had never broken the silence he himself had instituted concerning the exile, that the younger brother had forgotten to be suspicious about it and feared only Hester Dayrell, his dead sister's daughter.

"That will is not a just one," broke in Professor Pringle in the same dry didactic tone he would have used in stating some recently discovered fact of natural history. "Supposing Arthur Poyntz to be still living, and it is a perfectly natural supposition, what provision is there for Hester Dayrell?"

The lawyer turned over some papers on the table, and from them selected a letter. "Mr. Poyntz has left a letter for his son, in the event of his being alive, in which he requests his heir to make suitable provision for Miss Dayrell, also

appointing him her guardian conjointly with Professor Pringle," and the man of law bowed gravely to the Professor as he replaced the paper he had taken up with the others on the table.

"Yes, yes, that is all very well, but suppose that Arthur Poyntz, alive at this minute, should die before coming home to take possession, or say at any time before making a will; to whom would Swarling Tower go in such a case—Hester Dayrell?" asked the Professor.

"No, because such a contingency has not been provided for. In such a case it would descend to the natural heir of Arthur, his brother George," and again the lawyer bowed.

A fierce gleam of something—hope, exultation, triumph, leaped for a moment into the sombre eyes of George Poyntz, but it faded again, leaving them gloomy as before.

"And meanwhile, that is to say until it can be ascertained whether Arthur Poyntz is still living, or if not, the date of his death, what is to be done?" asked the Professor again. Seeing old Stephen had named him as one of the guardians of Hester, it behoved him, he thought, to look well to her interests.

"Mr. George Poyntz is the executor," said the lawyer, looking again at the will, as though it was necessary to refresh his memory concerning its clauses, "and he will take up his residence here, managing affairs pending the discovery of the whereabouts of his brother; and a suitable provision for Miss Dayrell can be arranged for the same period."

"I will not touch a penny, not a penny!" burst out Hester, hotly. "Why, if Uncle Arthur is alive now, and does not live to reach England, I have no claim at all."

"But that is only a possible circumstance, not a probable one, Miss Hester," replied the lawyer.

"Still, until we know how we stand, and just exactly what my position is, I'll not touch a penny. I would rather starve;" and she flung up her head in superb disdain.

"Nonsense! starving isn't so pleasant when it comes to

the point," said George Poyntz contemptuously, though in his heart he had never come so near really liking his niece before.

"There will be no need to starve, Uncle George, whilst I am well and strong and can work for my living," she retorted loftily.

He laughed, a harsh, grating sound it was, utterly lacking merriment, yet filled with disbelief. "What can you do, a child like you?" and his eyes travelled over the slender form in cool disparagement, thereby adding fuel to the fire of her indignation.

"I am not a child! I was sixteen last May, and hundreds of girls earn their living as young as that. I can be a servant."

"You could be. But you would not like it," said the lawyer, feeling in his heart thankful that old Stephen had named Professor Pringle, and not himself, as Hester's guardian.

"I dare say not; many things in life are not pleasant," she said, hotly still, and feeling, truth to tell, dreadfully injured by the terms of her grandfather's will. In fact, George Poyntz himself could hardly resent it more.

"It need not be settled to-day," the lawyer said, shutting the papers into the box again, and locking it with a decided snap.

"Yes, it must be settled to-day. I shall not stay here," said Hester, in a tone which for firmness rivalled the lawyer's. "Professor Pringle, will you take me home with you to-night?"

"Certainly, my dear. I am sure Mrs. Pringle will be only too happy to receive you," he answered warmly, feeling that the arrangement would be best for all concerned, and remove any danger of friction.

"Alice, is tea ready?" asked George Poyntz impatiently. He had endured enough of heroics, and was anxious to end the scene.

Mrs. Poyntz rose nervously, saying she would go and see, being too unused to her new position to venture on ringing

the bell. George frowned, but said nothing, and a moment later tea being announced, they all filed off to the dining-room, where a well-spread table awaited them. Tea at Swarling Tower was no light refreshment, but a substantial meal, matching in the solidity of its providing any other meal of the day.

Hester alone had disappeared, and Mrs. Poyntz was in the place of honour behind the urn, whilst her husband, from the other end of the table, looked after the wants of the company, pressing hospitality upon them, just the same as though the terms of his father's will had been different, and he had inherited according to his desires.

Poor Mrs. Poyntz found it dreadfully difficult to keep her mind on the business in hand, putting lumps of sugar in the cups, pouring the rich yellow cream after them, and even ordering Susan to bring more hot water for the urn. It was like playing at possession—the shadow, and not the substance, which for years she had so yearned after ; and she could have cried with vexation and disappointment to think of the weeks, and even months, that she might have to keep up the same farce of proprietorship, only to end at the last by returning to the small, inconvenient house in Welbury village, with existence stripped of the hope of ultimate escape, which had before rendered it bearable.

When tea was over, and the guests dispersing, Hester Dayrell came downstairs ready dressed for her journey, whilst Jane, the stout cook, bore after her a heavy portmanteau, a small dress-basket, and shawls and umbrellas past counting almost. The basket had been so hastily packed that a long end of ribbon and a bulging fold of merino hung from the side, whilst the shawls and umbrellas dropped in a varying stream from Jane's fat arms, as, heavily encumbered, she slowly descended the stairs.

" You are not really going now, to-night, dear ? " asked Mrs. Poyntz, all in a flutter at this sudden and—to her—rash decision of Hester's.

"Yes, Aunt Alice, the sooner the better. I have only taken a few of my things—the big boxes can be sent later; they are all ready," she said, stooping to kiss her aunt, for she was the taller of the two.

"But you have not had time to pack your things whilst we have been having tea?" and Mrs. Poyntz stooped to seize the fluttering tag of ribbon hanging from the dress basket, and to tuck it neatly out of sight.

"The boxes I have filled since granfer died," Hester answered in a choked voice. "I thought it best to be ready for contingencies, don't you see, and if the place had been left to Uncle George, I wanted to be in readiness to beat a hasty retreat. But I was not prepared for a hopeless muddle like this," and she almost snorted with disgust.

"It is a very cruel and tantalising will," sighed poor Mrs. Poyntz, thinking of her five children, and the slender chance there remained of Swarling Tower ever descending to them.

"Never mind, Aunt Alice, possession is nine points of the law, you know, and once Uncle George gets a firm grip on the place it will need a very clear argument to make him give it up again," Hester said with her accustomed candour.

"Hush, dear, do not speak of your uncle like that!" she objected in a deprecatory tone.

"It is quite true. Though perhaps it is not nice of me to say it to you, who are his wife. Good-bye, Aunt Alice, let Allie and Flossie have my bedroom at the top of the house, it is so pleasant and sunny, and tell the boys to be kind to poor old Rover; granfer was so fond of him."

Mrs. Poyntz was crying as she watched Hester step into the cab, followed by Professor Pringle; and yet in her heart she could not be sorry, either for the girl's sake or her own, that Hester had, for a time at least, chosen to dwell under some other roof.

The two maid servants, Jane and Susan, stood side by side in the hall, tearful and yet defiant, ready to regard Mrs.

Poynz in the light of an interloper, and as such to resent her presence and authority.

But for once she was equal to the occasion, accomplishing by her gentleness a conquest that no amount of firmness would ever have gained. "Jane and Susan, you will help me to keep the old home nice for her, won't you? It is terribly hard for her, poor child, to have to go away like this."

"That we will, Mrs. George," responded Jane heartily, she being spokeswoman; and then without another objecting murmur the two sullen hand-maidens laid down their arms, completely subjugated.

"I am going to the village for the children, Alice; have beds made for them, and keep tea on the table," commanded George, coming back into the hall when he had seen the last guest depart.

"To-night—so soon? Why, George, it wouldn't be decent!" she said with a gasp of horror at the thought of those noisy boys and girls careering about the house, from whence the dead had been so recently carried forth.

"Decent, nonsense!" he retorted brusquely. "We can't leave them at the cottage alone, and we can't leave here ourselves."

Mrs. Poynz gave in then, as, indeed, she always had to do when her husband spoke. And thus the day that saw Hester Dayrell dispossessed of her place of power at Swarling Tower passed into night and the region of things that have been.

CHAPTER VI.

NEWS FROM AFAR.

SIX months had passed away, and as yet no news of Arthur Poyntz had been received, though active search was being made for reliable tidings of his whereabouts. The collection of stuffed birds, monkeys, and other creatures received by the authorities of the Stourbridge Museum more than seven years before had been sent from the Philippines; since then nothing had been heard of the wanderer.

But he had spoken then of sending a further consignment at some future time, and those chiefly concerned in his discovery were hoping that if he were still alive he would redeem his promise, and so enable his friends to communicate with him.

George Poyntz was still in possession at Swarling Tower, and likely to be; for supposing Arthur to be dead, and Hester Dayrell her grandfather's heiress, then George would have to manage the estate until her majority, in which case he meant to make his private pickings as large as possible.

Hester herself remained under the roof of that worthy man, Professor Pringle, keeping obstinately to her determination of not taking a penny from Swarling whilst her claim on it remained uncertain. Being equally firm in her decision of earning her own living, the Professor had suggested that she should assist him in his natural history labours, giving him her help in the museum, and receiving in return board and lodging, with a small salary that would suffice to keep her in clothes.

She had a shrewd idea that he made the offer out of

charity, and in pity for her position ; and this caused her to hesitate about accepting it at first. But finding that she could really be helpful to him, and that there was work in abundance to her hand, she gladly stayed on in the quaint old house next the Stourbridge Museum, spending her days in reducing the crabbed hieroglyphics of the Professor into readable matter from her own pen, or in helping him dust and arrange the curiosities gathered under the roof of the building next door. Professor Pringle had been a great traveller in his time, and was a great scholar likewise ; it was a liberal education to hear him talk even, and Hester was reaping bigger advantages from the association than even food, shelter, and wages.

She was happy, too—that is, after the first keen sorrow of her bereavement had waned to a tender regret under the healing hand of time ; and she would not have cared to change her lot to be the acknowledged mistress of Swarling Tower, but for the desire to spite her Uncle George.

This most reprehensible trait of Hester's character was due to a long-standing feud between uncle and niece. He had always looked on her as an interloper, begrudging her the home and position she had found in her grandfather's house. And she, quick to feel his dislike and jealousy, child though she was, had been equally quick to resent it, giving back dislike for dislike, and suspicion for suspicion, until the relations between the two had become so strained as to occasionally break into open hostility.

The remarkable thing about it was that the ill-feeling went no farther than George himself. Between the rest of his family and Hester there had always been the warmest friendliness, and indeed the chief cause of young George, the eldest of the family, being sent away to sea, was because the elder George, his father, suspected him of being too fond of Hester Dayrell.

One raw cold morning at the end of February, Professor Pringle came down to his breakfast to find a letter among his

correspondence bearing the post-mark of Singapore. This in itself was not wonderful, the Professor having many letters from out-of-the-way and distant places; but when on breaking the seal he discovered it had reference to the property and effects of Arthur Poyntz, deceased, he jumped up with as much noise and clatter as though he had received tidings that a bombshell had burst and destroyed half Stourbridge.

“My dear Joseph, I implore you be calm; what has happened?” inquired Mrs. Pringle, a smartly-dressed, precise looking lady, who sat very stiffly erect behind the silver coffee-pot.

“It is news of Arthur Poyntz at last, my dear Sophia, and he is dead.”

“Hush! It is not seemly to announce a fact like that in such a jubilant tone,” said his wife reprovingly.

“But think of Hester, poor little Hester; she will have her rights now!” he cried ecstatically, though in obedience to the hint from his wife he drew his face into melancholy lines, endeavouring to look as mournful as possible.

“It is not right that a girl like Hester should have Swarling Tower, which, failing Arthur, should have been left to George. Old Stephen’s will was both cruel and unjust,” Mrs. Pringle remarked with quite aggressive dogmatism.

“My dear, with that we have nothing to do, saving to accept the conditions, and Hester is a very lovable girl,” replied the Professor patiently.

“Indeed she is, and that is why it seems such a pity that she should be spoiled by being set up as an heiress, and a prey to all the needy fortune-hunters that choose to make her an object for their flatteries,” the lady retorted warmly.

The Professor was opening his mouth to formulate his next mild argument; he had been over the ground so many times before that he had the answers to his wife’s indignant criticisms well at his fingers’ ends, when the entrance of Hester herself arrested his words, and instead, he handed her the letter which had just arrived.

"News of your Uncle Arthur, Hester—he is dead," he said gravely.

She took it with a quick exclamation of surprise, read it twice through, and handed it back in silence.

"We may congratulate you now," he said gently, "for you will be mistress of Swarling Tower."

"Not so, Professor. I shall be penniless, as I am now," she answered quite steadily, though there was a little catch in her breath, betraying how forced was her composure.

"But— but—" began the Professor, turning again to the letter.

"Don't you see it says that he—Uncle Arthur—died at the beginning of the rainy season, and you told me that the rainy season in Borneo is from November to May," she went on, smiling now at the discomfiture so plainly written on his face.

"Then Hester will not inherit, but George!" exclaimed Mrs. Pringle, starting up in great excitement, and almost snatching the letter from her husband's hand.

It was only a brief business communication from some trade official in Singapore, and addressed to the Curator of the Stourbridge Museum, informing him that a cargo of natural history specimens, comprising stuffed birds, monkeys, snakes, with various other curiosities, had been forwarded from that port to England in accordance with instructions left by the late Arthur Poyntz, naturalist, who had died at Brunei, Borneo, at the beginning of the rainy season.

"Won't Uncle George just exult that his luck has turned at last?" said Hester grimly, as she drew her chair to the table, and commenced a savage assault on a loaf of bread, as though intending to eat it all.

For once, Mrs. Pringle cast dignity to the winds, and, flinging her arms about Hester, hysterically declared that she should never want a crust of bread whilst Sophia Pringle lived, nor afterwards either; which, seeing that Mrs. Pringle had private property, might be taken as an intimation of her intention to leave it to the young lady.

The Professor, blowing his nose loudly and aggressively, applauded this statement of his wife's, and confirmed it with great decision from his own standpoint also, so that between the two of them Hester had no resource but to break down and burst into tears, which melted somewhat the hard crust of her reserve and pride.

They were all of them the better for this little confidential outburst, and, recovering their composure, set about the necessary discussion of what to do next.

"I will take the letter round to Mr. Holtum after breakfast," said the Professor, Mr. Holtum being the lawyer who had charge of the affairs.

"Poor Uncle Arthur, I wonder how he died!" mused Hester, who, despite her attack on the loaf, was eating next to no breakfast.

"Killed in some expedition, perhaps, for he was always very adventurous and careless of his life; or he may have been consumptive, like his mother, your grandmother, Hester, whom he strongly resembled," said Mrs. Pringle.

"Did you know him?" asked the girl in surprise, for though she knew that the Professor had met him abroad, she had not heard of any intimacy which included Mrs. Pringle as well.

Husband and wife exchanged glances, and the Professor said, as he rose to leave the table, "Tell her all about it, my dear Sophia; she will be the better for knowing, and it cannot possibly hurt any one now."

Thus adjured, Mrs. Pringle turned again to Hester: "I knew your Uncle Arthur years ago, dear child, almost as well as I know you. He was always at our house, the attraction being my young sister Amy, who died ten years ago."

"That sad-looking lady, Mrs. Harcourt, who gave me a doll once?" asked Hester in surprise.

"Yes, but she was not sad-looking in those days; she was your uncle's affianced wife then, and as bright and merry as

though no such thing as trouble existed in the world ; " and Mrs. Pringle sighed retrospectively.

" What parted them ? " demanded Hester with breathless eagerness, for who would not be interested in a bit of pure romance like this ?

" Your grandfather. My sister, Amy Martin, was no match for a Poyntz of Swarling Tower, for we were very poor at that time, and many and bitter were the quarrels between the old man and his son over the unfortunate attachment. It ended eventually in your uncle leaving home. When this took place we all expected that Arthur and Amy would marry, and face the world on their own account, but some one with a lying tongue stepped between them, making a breach too big to be healed ; and Amy became Mrs. Sam Harcourt, whilst your uncle left England never to return. That is the story, Hester ; it spoiled two lives, I might say three, for Sam Harcourt would have been a kinder husband and a happier man if he had married a woman who had loved him, instead of my sister, who cared only for your uncle ; " and again Mrs. Pringle sighed, and this time more heavily than before.

" It sounds like a story book," Hester remarked, getting up from the table and coming round to the fire.

Mrs. Pringle rang the bell for the table to be cleared, leaving the room soon after to interview the fishmonger, and Hester remained staring into the fire with a very grave face indeed.

She was thinking of the difference her uncle's death would make to her. If he had lived and come home to England, she would have taken her old place at Swarling Tower, and enjoyed all the advantages such a position could give. Or supposing him to have died earlier, that is before her grandfather, then Swarling Tower would have been her own to do just as she pleased with. The bare idea made her gasp, as dim visions of what she would have done under such circumstances floated through her brain.

But it was all over now, the suspense, the pleasurable expectation, and the almost certainty of inheritance. Hester's grand castles in the air had come down with a crash about her ears, and she stood breathless and dismayed amidst the ruins.

When the servant, having finished with the breakfast things, left the room, Hester put her head down on the mantelpiece and indulged in a few tears, but not for long, as she rather scorned the weakness of weeping when things went wrong. Then throwing her head up with a toss, as though bidding defiance to fate, she wiped her eyes and, taking her pass-key, went by the private door into the museum to commence her daily dusting.

It so chanced that when the Professor reached Mr. Holtum's office he met George Poyntz on the steps coming out.

"Ah! you are early in town this morning, Mr. Poyntz!" the Professor remarked in greeting. He did not like George Poyntz, believing him to be a grasping, self-seeking man, but he was genial and pleasant to him, as he was to everyone.

"Yes, I was coming last night, but could not get away soon enough," George replied, shaking hands with the Professor, but stiffly, considering himself aggrieved by that gentleman's protection of Hester, though, seeing that old Stephen Poyntz had left her to his guardianship, he had only done his duty in giving her a home.

"You have heard the news then, I suppose?" he said, his head being so full of it that it did not occur to him that George Poyntz might have come to Stourbridge on quite different business.

"What news? Have you heard from Arthur?" cried George, falling back a pace and gazing half startled at the Professor, conscious that his heart was beating almost to suffocation.

"Not from him, but of him, poor fellow," replied the other gravely, adding, after a momentary hesitation, "Come

back into the office with me; these tidings concern you equally with Hester."

No need to bid him come; he was pressing close behind, hardly having patience to wait while the Professor greeted Mr. Holtum. Arthur was dead, that was evident; what concerned him chiefly now was when the death took place, and for this he waited, hardly daring to draw his breath.

"At the beginning of the rainy season," commented Mr. Holtum, when he had read the letter from Singapore. "Just when does the rainy season commence in Borneo, Professor, I confess that I do not know?" And the lawyer waved his hands apologetically, as though in deprecation of his own ignorance.

"In November, I think, but it will be well to make sure of this date," began the Professor grudgingly, feeling rather than seeing the light that for a moment leaped into the eyes of the man at his side.

"Of course, of course. We should not move in a matter of this kind until the date is settled beyond dispute," replied the lawyer, his sharp, incisive utterance cutting across the Professor's slower speech.

"And, meanwhile, everything is uncertain, just as it was before," said George Poyntz, a breathlessness in his tone, as though he had been running.

"Precisely, Mr. Poyntz, and even when the date is known we have still to discover whether your deceased brother left a will behind him, and where it may be found," said the lawyer.

"If he has left such a document it would probably be among his papers and the specimens that are now on their way to England. Perhaps when they arrive you would like to be present at the unpacking, gentlemen?" and the Professor looked from the lawyer to George Poyntz.

"Yes, that will be best for all concerned; meanwhile, Professor, I will have a copy of that letter, if you please, and put myself in communication with your correspondent in

Singapore. It is really remarkable that the information we were seeking should have come to hand so readily ;" and Mr. Holtum rang for his clerk, in order to have the important letter duplicated without further loss of time.

George Poyntz went home with the sensations of a man in a dream. The good thing he desired had come tantalisingly close to his grasp now, yet still it was just out of his reach. Arthur might have died sooner than the Singapore man supposed, or on the other hand he might have left a will disposing of his property to strangers ; a likely enough proceeding seeing that he had been thrust out from home and disowned by his kin, as George reflected bitterly during his drive home.

Mrs. Pringle had told Hester only part of the story concerning Arthur's exile ; perhaps she did not know it all. But George Poyntz knew it, having himself helped on the evil rumours which had made the irreconcilable breach between his brother and Amy Martin.

It is only fair to him to say that he honestly believed in the truth of his statements when he made them, but if his brotherly affection had been warmer and truer he would have taken care to have made a closer investigation of the slanders before giving them out as *bonâ-fide* facts. Afterwards, when all the mischief had been done, the truth came to light, and Arthur's name was cleared ; but by that time he was wandering in exile, burdened with his father's curse, and the woman he loved was the wife of another man. It was too late then to clear things up, and so they had been left as they were, and only the conscience of George upbraided him with having played the part of Cain and spilled his brother's blood, or if not actual blood, honour, character, and reputation.

He was thinking of these things as he drove homeward, the keen wind scudding across the wide stretches of downs and attacking him in the flank and rear. And he told himself that if only the past could be lived over again, he

would pursue a very different line of conduct, and one which would ensure him peace of conscience instead of the unrest of mind under which he laboured now.

Things had not prospered with George Poyntz. He had aimed at marrying money, and found to his anger and dismay that his wife's father was declared a fraudulent bankrupt three weeks after their marriage, and had to fly the country to escape a prison. Then in that matter of his own father's will, George's conscience told him that he was but reaping as he had sown, and that his being overlooked and set aside was but the just reward for his own double-dealing and evil-speaking, and the seed he had sown had brought him a harvest of trouble and discontent.

But his brother was dead now, and the wrong would never be righted, though his repentance might in due time bring him, if not forgiveness, peace. And as the thought came into his mind, and grew in intensity until it became a prayer, his horse bore him over the crest of the last swelling upland ; where nestling below at the foot of the downs lay the barns, and oast-houses, and the grey house with its corner tower—the fair heritage that he loved and longed for.

At the same moment almost that he came in sight of it, the sun broke through the clouds and sent a flood of radiance down. Was it an omen of good ?

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SPECIMENS.

THE cases containing the specimens from Borneo arrived in due course. Queer, uncouth packages they were, some made of loosely-woven rattan, others of thin boards and bamboo frame work, and of every possible shape and size. The railway men who brought them from the station to the museum handled them in a nervous fashion, as though fearful lest the dead snakes contained inside might turn to live ones in the unpacking; and when they had deposited their load in the entrance hall, decamped hastily, utterly refusing to assist in getting the cases up to the Professor's private room on the floor above.

There were ten of these cases, all told, and they pretty well filled the open space at the bottom of the stairs, where the elephant stands, causing the Professor to rub his forehead in perplexity as to what to do with them.

The museum was free to the public between the hours of ten and four, the big reading room downstairs opening at the same time. It was out of the question to leave the entrance barricaded in this fashion all day, and already the hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes to ten, when, according to custom, the big doors must be swung open and thrown back.

But he was a man of resource, and his dilemma lasted only a few moments; rushing through the private door into his own house, he shouted at the top of his voice, "Sophia, Sophia, Hester, Mary, Bob, come quick, all of you!" and then, making sure that his summons had been heard, and was in

a fair way of being obeyed, he hurried back again, and, seizing on one of the smaller packages, toiled perspiringly to the floor above, and trotted down for another.

Bob, the knife-and-boot boy, was the first to appear, a shock-headed youth, as strong as a small Samson, and willing for any exertion that promised variety from his daily toil. Following him came the trim little maid-of-all-work, whilst Hester and Mrs. Pringle brought up the rear.

"The place must be cleared at once. Those idiots of railway carters thought the packages contained live snakes, instead of dead ones!" exclaimed the Professor with a snort of disgust at the cowardice of the men.

"But others might have been hired," objected Mrs. Pringle dubiously, it not according with her ideas of dignity to do light porter's work, and assist in hauling uncouth packages upstairs.

"No time! no time, my dear Sophia! look at the clock!" admonished the good man in a breathless tone, tugging away at a package bigger than himself, and calling to Bob to help him.

Mrs. Pringle did look at the clock, the hands of which were getting very near to ten, and seeing there was no other alternative, seized upon a package, heaving a sigh of resignation at the loss of dignity involved.

For the next ten minutes they toiled with Herculean efforts to get the lower entrance hall cleared, in which task they succeeded, hopelessly blocking the landing above, however, for several of the packages were too big and awkward in shape to be got through the door of the Professor's private room, and these of necessity were left outside, where, piled one upon another, they had to remain, to the inconvenience of every one passing up the stairs.

Hester had bruised her arm and scratched her face in her efforts, whilst Mary had a big rent in her apron, but these were minor matters, and they stood for a moment to gaze triumphantly on their achievements before rushing away to hide themselves when the doors were opened.

Usually there were not many visitors at such an early hour, but on this particular morning quite a number of interested spectators passed up the steps and into the building, to see for themselves the curiosities that had just arrived ; the fame of which the railway men were spreading through the town, with many a hint and innuendo as to the dangerous nature of the consignment.

But these had a scanty reward for their pains, being unable to sate their desire for information otherwise than by reading the labels on the packages obstructing the upper landing. In an ordinary case they would have found the Professor unpacking his new treasures, with Hester to help him, and would have been permitted the privilege of looking on and listening to his words of wisdom and explanation, as they fell from his lips.

To-day no such treat was in store for them ; the Professor was there certainly, stooping over the skeleton of a Norwegian fox that occupied an out-of-the-way corner, and apparently making copious notes on its anatomy. When questioned concerning the consignment just received, he replied that legal interests were involved, and in consequence the unpacking would not be done in public, but privately, and in presence of those most concerned in the fate of the donor, Arthur Poyntz.

This information was but as fuel to the fire of their curiosity, and all day long a stream of visitors thronged into the building, and upstairs past the obstructing cases into the big chamber, with its store of relics and wonders, gathered from almost every country of the habitable globe.

A party of Americans "doing Stourbridge," looked in on their way to the cathedral, pronounced it a "stuffy old rag-and-bone store," and went on their way. But they swarmed back again later, having been made aware of current gossip, and anxious like the rest for a sight of the shipment just come in, and of the girl so closely connected with the deceased sender. Hester did not, however, come into the

public rooms that day, though she remained for a long time writing in the Professor's private room, to reach which she had to pass up the main staircase, encountering the gaze of the curious, to whom, on that day at least, she was more an object of interest than any exhibit contained in the collection.

It was over at last, however, and punctually at four o'clock, before the cathedral chimes had ceased, the museum doors were closed. And the lawyer and George Poyntz, arriving five minutes later, were admitted by way of the Professor's house.

They went at once to the task of unpacking, the lawyer and George Poyntz, with Hester and Mrs. Pringle looking on, whilst the Professor and Bob got the cases undone. Before the third case was touched even, the Professor was dancing about on the tips of his toes and hurrahing under his breath like a school-boy at the unique specimens being disclosed to view, and the others forgot the one particular object they were in search of, in the many wonderful and curious things spread out before their gaze. There were crescent-shaped earrings of brass—huge things which would have been awkwardly big to wear as bracelets or anklets even, while to think of them depending from the ears was enough to make one shiver ; also necklaces of black and white beads, the deadly blow-pipe, strange-looking spoons fashioned from the shoulder blades of monkeys, various daggers and spears, a human skull, and bags, belts, and pouches made of snake skins, were among the articles brought to light. After these came the stuffed specimens—strange birds of brilliant plumage, sitting in the forked branches of equally strange trees ; one or two snakes quite life-like, and terror-inspiring in the cleverness of their preservation ; a black ape staring at its reflection in a fragment of looking-glass ; a civet cat, a porcupine, and a queer creature labelled as a flying frog.

Besides these things were huge hats as big as umbrellas, plaited from the nipa palm, bed mats made of attap, or

woven in coloured rattan with the skin of a wawah, and dried and pressed flowers of every description.

But there were no papers saving a packet of letters, yellow with age, which bore on them instructions in the dead man's handwriting, "To be burned at my death," which instructions had been unheeded by those who packed the things; and the string giving way as the Professor handled the packet, some of the letters fell out and fluttered to the ground.

Mrs. Pringle picked them up, and giving them back to her husband, said in a broken voice, "They are Amy's letters; he has treasured them all these years, poor fellow;" while George Poyntz started at her words, and savagely gnawed at his under lip, the demon of remorse in his heart awaking again and thrusting at him with sharp pangs of remembrance.

"There is no will," announced the lawyer at length, when the last thing had been unearthed from the packing cases, and there seemed absolutely nothing left to be discovered.

"What is this?" cried Hester Dayrell, whose eyes were sharp, and her senses keenly alert. She had caught up a thick square package from among the rubbish of wrapperings strewing the floor, and was holding it out to the Professor.

He took it, the lawyer looking over his shoulder the while, and taking off the covers revealed two manuscript books of ruled foolscap, one of which was entirely filled with writing, whilst the other had fifty or sixty blank pages at the end. Both books were labelled "Diary of My Wanderings," and the last entry was dated November the tenth.

"Conclusive proof that, that he outlived his father," was the lawyer's one comment, as he turned away, stumbling as he did so over another packet similar to the one with the two manuscript books. This parcel proved to be written matter also, the beginnings of an exhaustive work on the natural history of Borneo, but it was useless in the settlement of the present difficulty; and Mr. Holtum decided to leave both that and the diary in the hands of Professor Pringle, who might

need to refer to them in the classification and description of the specimens.

"There seems but little doubt as to your inheriting, though of course we must wait for the proof," said the lawyer, turning to George Poyntz when the unpacking was over.

"Just so, we must wait," he replied, adding; "I don't know how the law stands, and whether Hester could claim a share in right of her mother, but if not I shall make her a handsome allowance from the estate."

"And I," said Hester Dayrell, standing up straight and slim amid the chaos all about her, "will touch not a penny of your handsome allowance, Uncle George; keep it for some one who would prize it more. I would rather die of starvation under a hedge, or go to the workhouse, than subsist on your charity!"

"Hush, hush, my dear Hester, this is not seemly; it is not decent!" cried Mrs. Pringle, with a sound of tears in her voice. She was thinking, poor soul, of her dead sister Amy, who had been hot-headed and impulsive, like Hester, and the tears were regrets for the misery her impulsive actions had brought.

"I am sorry to say such unpleasant things, of course," replied Hester calmly, as she flicked some dust from the front of her black frock, "but it is always best to speak the truth, and so I have no choice but to be rude to Uncle George."

George Poyntz at that moment looked as wretched as though all hope of inheritance had passed away from him, instead of having been made almost certain, and he turned doggedly away, as though not caring to meet or encounter the steady gaze of his niece.

Mrs. Pringle pressed him to take tea with them, and the lawyer also, but both refused, the latter pleading business as an excuse, the former probably finding the atmosphere too antagonistic.

When they had gone, Hester plumped down amidst the confusion of wrappings and rubbish strewing the room, and

burst into a fit of bitter weeping. She would be seventeen soon, and looked older, but she was very much of a child still, as was evidenced by her passion and tears.

The sound of the tea-bell came faintly to her through the open doors, but she did not heed it, and sobbed on in her indignation and misery until she was thoroughly worn out and exhausted.

Presently a hand was laid on her shoulder, and the Professor's voice, kind and gentle, but withal a trifle reproving, sounded in her ear. "Hester, you are behaving like a baby now. It is of no use crying over spilt milk; work hard and carve out a destiny for yourself, child. An independence earned is always more to be desired than a fortune inherited."

"It is not that I mind being poor, and I like work, but it is hard that granfer should have treated me so," sobbed Hester; whose inward hurt must find a means of protest against its pain and wrong.

"You don't suppose he meant that you should be left like this, do you?" remonstrated the Professor.

"Then why did he make his will as he did?" she asked, uncomforted still.

"Child, do you not see that neither he nor any other person would have dreamed of events falling out as they have done. It is of all things strange and remarkable that your uncle should have lived long enough to dispossess you, yet not long enough to make the provision for you that he most assuredly would have made had he known the conditions of his father's will."

Hester wiped her eyes and tried to feel consoled; the effort going a long way towards comforting her in her affliction. "I won't take any money from Uncle George!" she said in an energetic tone, when her handkerchief finally retired to her pocket.

"You need not unless you like. As I said before, you are quite capable of earning your own living, and in many

ways it will be better that you should; it will soften you, Hester, and sweeten your character; and you are not faultless by any means, you know."

Hester laughed, then laughed again at her own absurdity in being merry over nothing; but Professor Pringle looked grave, almost sad.

"I will come down to tea now, if there is any left, that is," she said, her youthful appetite beginning to assert itself.

"Mrs. Pringle sent me to fetch you," said the Professor; and then they went away downstairs, and through the communicating passage to the house next door, leaving the unpacked specimens and curiosities standing about in confusion, just as they had been taken out of the packing cases. The black ape, with its bit of looking-glass, had been carried into the big room and put down on a table among some prehistoric clubs and spears, no one guessing or dreaming of the magnificent treasure hidden away in the ugly creature's neck, in search of which more than one murder had already been committed. A bundle of rattan mats and attap kajangs lay on the floor close by, while the other things were grouped about on tables and shelves, just where there had been room at the moment to put them.

Over the tea-table that night, Hester and her guardian discussed the future at some length; nothing better than her present work could be desired for her; only if she was to look to it for a maintenance it would be necessary that she should enter on a regular course of study, and among other things go in for taxidermy under a practical man. The Professor said he knew a suitable man, and would see him about the matter without further delay.

Mrs. Pringle demurred a little at the thought of Hester skinning rabbits and birds, rats and mice even, for the sake of gaining experience, declaring that such occupation was unlady-like, and not to be thought of; but her husband and Hester laughed at her scruples, and the good lady, being a minority of one, was fain to give way and accept the inevitable.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM THE DIARY OF ARTHUR POYNTZ.

THE lawyer's letter to Singapore received its answer in due course, though there was more delay about the matter than George Poyntz approved of. The Singapore man had to send the English lawyer's letter on to Brunei, where it finally reached the hands of the Chinese doctor, Tsing Bang, who immediately wrote a series of hieroglyphics by way of a death certificate, and forwarded it to Singapore, where it was re-directed on to Stourbridge.

But though Stourbridge was regarded as the seat of learning for the county, and many scholars dwelt there, under shadow of its cathedral, there was no one wise enough in all the city to read Tsing Bang's letter when it arrived, and Mr. Holtum was compelled to have the precious document photographed, and send the photographs to a Chinese expert in London, whilst George Poyntz fretted and fumed, and each day waxed more impatient concerning the delay.

June was drawing to a close, and the haymakers were in full tide of work at Swarling, before George Poyntz had received the final word which made the estate his own.

Getting up early one morning, he took his gun and went round the hop plantations, with the twofold purpose of knocking over any rabbits he might chance upon, and of seeing how his hops were coming on. A great uneasiness had possessed him all night, a premonition of something about to happen, which would put the desire of his heart further away from him than before. Hour after hour he had tossed and turned, unable to sleep or even to rest quietly in

his bed, and with the first glimmering of dawn he was up and out in the sweet fresh air.

But daylight comes early in June, and George Poyntz had wandered for miles before it was time to turn his footsteps homeward for breakfast. The exercise and the air had done him good, and when he reached home he had four rabbits hanging over his shoulder, while his dour face, if not cheerful, had lost some at least of its haggard unrest.

Mrs. Poyntz was bustling about in the big kitchen, actively directing and superintending the labours of Jane and Susan in house and dairy. The wider, freer life at Swarling Tower had already worked a marvellous change in her, and from a nervous, depressed little woman she was developing into a rosy, smiling dame, who had leisure and to spare for all the thousand and one odd duties that crop up in the daily life of the mistress of a farm.

She rallied her husband gently on his early rising, but finding that he chafed somewhat at the mention of it, changed the subject and quietly put breakfast forward by half an hour, in order that he might have the food he so much needed after his hours of wandering.

The letter-bag from Welbury arrived usually in the middle of breakfast time. This morning, owing to the meal being so much earlier, it was not brought in until the children had finished and dispersed, and George Poyntz was lingering for a few moments over an agricultural paper before going out to his men.

He threw this down hastily and seized the bag when Susan brought it in to him. It was his pleasure to keep the key and dole out the contents himself. The bag was unusually empty on this particular day, one or two circulars, a dress-maker's bill for Mrs. Poyntz, and a letter from Mr. Holtum, being all that it contained.

This last George tore open with trembling fingers, and reading it hastily through, broke out into language neither refined nor polite.

"George, George, what is the matter?" cried Mrs. Poyntz, with a scared look round to see if any ears but her own had heard the unparliamentary outburst.

"Matter enough," he growled. "Read that;" and flinging the letter down on the table before her, he strode out of the room.

She picked it up, expecting to find nothing more serious than tidings of some further delay, but the contents of the letter turned her face to ashen grey, whilst a pitiful cry, half-moan, half-sob, escaped her.

The letter was brief, as such letters always are, and only stated that the lawyer desired to see Mr. Poyntz as soon as possible, fresh complications having arisen, which pointed to the existence of another will.

The June morning was sunny and warm, but Mrs. Poyntz shivered as though the chill of a bitter frost had touched her, and sat staring blankly through the window, seeing nothing but her own black misery, and trying to realise its full extent.

She had grown so confident and certain lately, so sure that nothing would ever turn up to make them obliged to leave their pleasant home; and now, when everything was nearly settled, this disquieting news comes to hand, and spoils all.

Presently her husband came back, ready for his drive to Stourbridge, his mood grim and savage, his face dark and lowering. "I'm going to see what all the fuss is about, Alice; and if I find that my father made a later will, leaving this place to that little upstart Hester Dayrell, I will contest it on the ground that he was insane when it was made," said he, hoarsely, laying his hand heavily on her shoulder, and even shaking her in his wrath.

A few tears gathered in her eyes, and dropped on to her folded hands; bringing ease to her but only serving to increase his anger, and he burst into railing at her weakness.

"Women are such babies and melt into tears on every occasion," he sneered bitterly; "I must be off now, Alice;

but look you here, if that chit of a girl has got the place you shall never speak to her again ; no, nor the children either."

"If I met her in the street I should be obliged to notice her, your sister's child," protested the poor little woman, whose motherly heart yearned over the orphaned Hester, with a very real affection.

"If she were my own child I should say the same," he replied in a hard tone, and went out of the room again.

But Mrs. Poyntz sat still in her place crying quietly now, too utterly crushed by the unexpected trouble to even remember that the servants might come in and find her in tears.

For a time no one came, however ; she heard the sound of the wheels on the gravel when her husband drove away, and the shouts of the children at play in the garden ; then there was a spell of comparative quiet, broken presently by an impetuous onrush of hasty feet. The door was thrown open, and in burst Hester Dayrell, to throw her arms round the forlorn little woman, and to hug her in a boisterous, bear-like caress.

"Hester, Hester, my dear child, why have you come ?" cried Mrs. Poyntz, suffering and even returning the caress, though with an uneasy conscience, having the fear of her husband before her eyes.

"Because I wanted to see you, and talk all this business over. I cycled here, inquired of the men if the coast was clear, and finding that mine uncle had already taken his departure, marched in without the ceremony of asking any one's permission," said Hester, who looked particularly bright and pretty in her trim black cycling skirt and white blouse.

"Your uncle has had bad news, Hester, very bad news ; and he is so angry with you that I am sure he would not let me talk to you if he knew," Mrs. Poyntz said, with guilty tremors, because of her daring to break the spirit, if not the letter, of his commands.

"Very well, I'll talk and you can listen ; that will do, as I

have no end to say to you. And there's no fear of Uncle George pouncing on us unawares, so you need not tremble so much. I gave old Jim Saxby a shilling to watch, and let me know if he saw him coming." Thus spoke Miss Hester with saucy defiance; then she bestowed more hugs and kisses on her aunt, finally drawing another chair close to the one in which Mrs. Poyntz was sitting, and dropping into it, commenced on the object of her coming.

"Professor Pringle made a discovery yesterday, Aunt Alice, that nearly set our hair on end, and drove Mr. Holtum into a frightful state of mind."

"Yes?" responded Mrs. Poyntz with indifference, supposing the discovery had reference to something connected with natural history, and feeling no burning desire to increase her scanty stock of knowledge in that direction.

"He set himself to read that diary of poor Uncle Arthur's," went on Hester, not heeding her aunt's lack of interest. "Of course he ought to have done it months ago, but we have been so driven at the museum lately that there has been no time for anything. And he found that Uncle Arthur has made a will himself."

Mrs. Poyntz gave a violent start, and there was no lack of interest in her tone as she cried, "To whom has he left the property, Hester?"

"Ah!" responded the young lady, shaking her head, "that is just what we all want to find out."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Poyntz, opening her eyes as wide as they would go.

"I mean that his will is not in England at all, but has been left in Borneo in charge of some native; dear me, what is her name? Oh! I remember Uncle Arthur said in his diary he had given the precious document into the charge of Song, the half-moon girl, who was a daughter of some Rajah, or chief, out there;" and Hester's voice took on a dubious tone, as though she suspected ill of such an arrangement.

"Hester, do you think he had married her?" queried

Mrs. Poyntz in an awe-struck tone, her face growing pinched and sharp with apprehension and dismay.

"That is what the Professor thinks, but of course we don't know. Oh, but it is the most awful muddle that ever could be imagined!" cried the girl, stamping her foot on the ground in wrath and vexation.

Mrs. Poyntz lifted her eyes to scan the troubled face of her niece, asking in some surprise, "Don't you think it is likely that he would have left anything he had to leave to you, Hester?"

"I don't see what special claim I could have on him; he hardly knew there was such a being as Hester Dayrell in the world, I should say. Oh no, Aunt Alice, I have no expectations of a windfall from that quarter, I can assure you, and I should be more than thankful to know that Swarling Tower really belonged to Uncle George."

"Why?" demanded the other, who having judged Hester according to her husband's standard, naturally supposed that she would rejoice at anything which interfered with his inheritance of the family estate.

"Because I should hate to see the dear old place overrun by a pack of half-caste relations. I daresay if Uncle Arthur had known of granfer's will he would have made his own with due reference to keeping the old home in proper hands; but if, as the Professor says, he just worded his will that this girl Song was to have all the property he might die possessed of, why there will be no help for it, and the Rajah's daughter, this half-moon girl, as Uncle Arthur calls her, can just walk in and take possession," and again Hester beat her foot on the ground in an angry tattoo.

"Perhaps he did not marry her; does the diary make any definite statement?" asked Mrs. Poyntz, clutching hard hold of the table, preparing herself for the worst that had to be told.

"There are no definite statements about anything that I could see; it is chiefly by the way he speaks of her that we

drew our conclusions," replied Hester, bringing a bundle of papers from her pocket, and beginning to turn them over on the table.

At this moment came an interruption in the shape of Allie, who burst into the room like a small tornado.

"Hullo! Hester, Jim Saxby said you had come, but I wouldn't believe it until I saw your bike at the back door," cried the twelve-year-old daughter of George Poyntz, precipitating herself upon her cousin with affectionate vigour.

"Go away now, dear; Hester and I want to talk," urged Mrs. Poyntz; but Miss Allie's desires not marching with her mother's wishes, she sat still on the corner of the table where she had perched herself, and made no attempt to move. Flossie rushed in soon after, a flaxen-haired mite of seven, and she also went into energetic raptures over her cousin, until Hester hit on a means of diverting these undesired attentions for a little while.

"Can you ride a bicycle, Allie?" she asked innocently enough, as she still sorted her packets of papers over and over.

"A little. George used to let me get on his sometimes when he was home from sea last year, but I haven't had a chance lately. When Steeve hires one he keeps it locked up when he isn't riding it," returned Allie in a deeply injured tone.

"You can try mine if you like, and let Flossie have a turn too, only don't hurt yourselves," said Hester quietly; and with yells and whoops of delight the two girls rushed away to try their skill in riding the bicycle, which already had evoked their envy.

"Let us go upstairs to your bed-room, Aunt Alice; we shan't be disturbed there, and the servants will want to clear here," said Hester, rising from her seat and gathering up her papers. "I copied some bits out of the diary before Professor Pringle took it to Mr. Holtum, and I will read them to you."

Mrs. Poyntz followed her mechanically; she had a dazed,

crushed sensation from the shock of the morning's tidings, and was stunned and bewildered by the statements of her niece.

Upstairs went Hester, with the familiar feeling of being at home once more; and leading the way into the wide sunny room where old Stephen Poyntz had died, pushed her aunt gently into a big easy chair standing before one of the windows, and locked the door.

Mrs. Poyntz was incapable of resistance just then, though a hazy wonder crossed her mind as to what George would say if he should suddenly return and find Hester there.

No similar forebodings appeared to trouble Hester, however; and sitting down near her aunt, she commenced reading the portions of the diary that she had found time to copy. These had reference to Song, chiefly, mentioning her visits, her skill in work, and her general capacity for improvement. There were also allusions to the exile's own condition, the progress of his disease, and the on-creeping of death, with pathetic revelations of his desperate home-sickness, which caused Mrs. Poyntz to weep sympathetically, whilst even Hester's hard young heart was touched, and her voice quavered and broke as she read.

There was one extract, dated early in November, that caused their hearts to beat the quicker, as its wording seemed to emphasise and justify their apprehensions. It was as follows :

“ Song has been with me for some hours to-day, and would have remained longer if I had not sent her away. Her affection and care are very sweet and touching, and she has promised to stand by me in that last dread struggle which is to rend asunder body and soul. It cannot be far off now: and if it were not for that poor lonely child, who has no one but me to look to for consolation and advice, I should be thankful to be quit of the world altogether.”

“ That sounds ominous, doesn't it? ” queried Hester, ceasing her reading for a minute and looking up at her aunt.

Mrs. Poyntz nodded feebly ; in view of the troubles and perplexities hedging her life just then, she could almost echo the desire of Arthur Poyntz to hurry on the end, and get it over.

"Here is another, even worse," said Hester. "Listen.

"To-day I have made my will. In view of existing circumstances and what is involved, it was highly necessary that this duty should not be delayed. Song brought in Tsing Bang and mine host, the gold-worker, as witnesses, and then, when they had gone, I sealed up the document and gave it into her care, knowing that she alone would guard it safely, and prevent it falling into the wrong hands. Should this diary, however, come into the possession of my kin, or of any friend interested in my family, I would urge on them that they search for this girl Song, and recover from her this my last will and testament, for on it hang great issues and the clue to a mystery that otherwise may never be solved. Song has instructions to deliver it up to any Englishman who shall come to seek it. Even supposing that she has left her father's house, she will not be hard to find, as she is tattooed at throat and wrists with half-moons done in blue. Should many years elapse before this reaches the eyes of those for whom it is intended, I would still urge that Song should be sought for without delay, as she holds a secret very important to the welfare of my family.'"

"Oh, Hester, what can it all mean?" cried Mrs. Poyntz in shivering dread of the secret held by the half-moon girl.

"Queer, isn't it!" ejaculated Hester, letting the papers fall unregarded on the floor, whilst she mused thoughtfully with her eyes fixed on the prospect outside the window.

"If she is his wife, why couldn't he have said so and ended the suspense; it is very cruel of him," said Mrs. Poyntz, with a stirring of righteous indignation against the man who had dared leave such a jumbled state of affairs behind him.

"I can't understand what he means by this great mystery;

there is something behind it all—unless, indeed, the poor, dear man had lost his reason," mused Hester, her eyes still fixed on that bit of the downs, visible from the window by which she was sitting.

"There is no mystery in getting married," objected Mrs. Poyntz, "and certainly I've never heard of any insanity in the family; the Poyntz temper isn't, as a rule, an over-sweet one, but it is sound."

"We shall have no peace until that will is found and we know its contents," said Hester with a sigh, as she picked up her papers and rose to go.

"You will stay for dinner, dear?" asked Mrs. Poyntz hospitably, but Hester shook her head.

"Not to-day, thank you, Aunt Alice; fancy what would happen if Uncle George came home in the middle of dinner and found me seated at table among his olive-branches! The Poyntz temper, as you observed, is not too sweet, and it wouldn't be fair to try Uncle George's forbearance after a blow like he has had to-day."

"I wish, Hester, that you and your uncle loved each other better," sighed Mrs. Poyntz plaintively.

"All in good time, Aunt Alice. Perhaps we shall consent to bury the hatchet and become the best of friends some day. If what we fear is fact, and this half-moon belle should come to queen it here at Swarling Tower, we may be glad to join forces against a common foe. Ugh! Suppose the lady is a cannibal! Shan't we be in a state of nervous trepidation every time she invites us to dinner?" And Hester laughed mischievously, as she gave a straightening touch to hat and hair before the toilet glass.

"Are they cannibals in Borneo, Hester?" inquired her aunt nervously.

"The Professor says some of them are; but they didn't eat Uncle Arthur, evidently. But, Aunt Alice," cried Hester, wheeling round from the glass, struck by a sudden thought, "what did he live on? Had he any private property,

or had he to earn his living during the time he was wandering in foreign lands?"

"He had nothing but what he earned, my dear, for your grandfather turned him out of doors, as you know. But Arthur was one of those men who can get their living under any circumstances, being able to turn from one thing to another with the greatest of ease. For a time at least after he went away he was working for an American museum that had deputed him to procure specimens, and for that he would be well paid I expect."

"Do you suppose the mystery has reference to some treasure hoard that he may have left behind him?" asked Hester, pausing at the head of the stairs to ask the question, her eyes gathering an expression of eager animation as they sought those of her aunt.

Mrs. Poyntz was opening her lips to reply, when a crash was heard somewhere outside the open hall door, followed by a piercing scream.

"That is Allie, and she has smashed my bicycle!" exclaimed Hester with a prophetic impulse, as, followed by her aunt, she ran hastily downstairs and out to the scene of the catastrophe.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HATCHET IS TEMPORARILY BURIED.

HESTER'S instincts proved correct. Allie had smashed the bicycle, and damaged herself considerably in the process. Not content with riding along the stretch of comparatively level roadway at the bottom of the downs, she had pushed the bicycle laboriously up the green slopes, and then putting her feet up, rushed down at breakneck speed, flying along the road from the impetus thus gained, to the wondering admiration of Flossie and the bailiff's children, who, gathered in a safe corner, applauded her prowess and cheered her on to further record-breaking feats.

But either she had grown careless, or had nervously given an unconscious twist to the steering wheel as she came down the third time, for the machine slewed sharply round and sent her with fearful violence crashing into the wall of the cast-house.

They picked her up as gently as possible, fearful of doing further damage in their ignorance regarding the extent of her injuries, and carrying her indoors laid her on the couch in the drawing-room, that being the nearest to the front door.

"The doctor must be fetched, I am sure there are some bones broken," cried Mrs. Poyntz, wringing her hands in impotent dismay.

"Let Steve go," said Hester, who, with a face as white as Allie's, was hanging over the couch.

"He isn't at home. He went off to Bradbourne by the early train from Cranwell," replied Mrs. Poyntz, who was endeavouring to unfasten the shoe of Allie's most damaged

foot, "and the men are all among the hay; couldn't you go, Hester?"

"The bicycle is in fragments, but I can walk," said the girl bravely, though the morning was hot, and it was a good four miles to Stourbridge.

"Oh, you mustn't walk, it would take too long; you can drive, and if Dr. Stapleton isn't in, bring his assistant back with you: only go at once; Jim Saxby will harness the cob for you," and Mrs. Poyntz waved her hands impatiently for her niece to be gone, for by this time Allie had ceased to scream and moan, and had sunk into unconsciousness.

Away rushed Hester, thankful to be of any use in undoing the evil she had been the innocent means of causing; and running to the rick-yard where Jim Saxby was laying the foundation of a haystack, she ordered him to harness the cob without delay.

"He ain't to home, Miss Hester; the maister drove him to Stourbridge; there's nowt but the colt, and he do be terrible tedious fresh, surely," and Jim Saxby scratched his head in grave consideration.

"I can drive him, Jim, and I'll put him along at such a rate that he won't feel very fresh by the time we reach the town," she replied with a determined compression of her lips.

"Maister's got the gig too; you'll have to drive the shay," said Jim, as he hurried stablewards, followed by Hester.

"That won't do. Suppose he wants to bolt, or takes to kicking, I shall have no chance at all. Where is that old cart that granfer used for bringing bran from the mill, and things of that kind?" she asked, lending a hand at getting Jerry, the chestnut colt, into his harness.

"That do be too shabby for a lady to drive. Us never uses it for nowt but farm and mill work now," expostulated the man.

"I don't care about the shabbiness, and it will be quicker and safer than the chaise. Make haste, Jim, and take that

strap up a hole higher, will you, please?" she said, her tone short and dictatorial like old Stephen's used to be, as her keen eye took in every strap and buckle of the harness to make certain that all reasonable precaution had been taken to ensure the safety of her journey. Jerry was a handful to drive, as she knew well; but he was hard to beat for speed, and that just now seemed the chief thing desirable.

"He'll do it in half-an-hour, miss, if you let him go," said Jim, as Hester climbed to her seat in the dirty old cart and took the reins from his hand.

"I shall be back under the hour if all is well," she replied, giving Jerry a gentle hint to be moving, and in another moment the cart was rattling down the road at a rate that threatened to more than justify her assertion of returning under the hour.

"She'll do it, if it is to be done," he muttered as he turned back to his work again, "or if not there'll be some more broken bones, I reckon."

Half-an-hour later George Poyntz was standing on the doorstep of the lawyer's house, having a last word with that gentleman anent the new complication in the settlement of affairs, when a horse and cart whirled past, and only by a miracle escaped an upset at the corner, where a barrel organ was discoursing the dulcet strains of "Daisy Bell."

"That was a near squeeze," ejaculated Mr. Holtum, who was watching the cart, and thinking he ought to know the girl who was driving. She had a man sitting beside her, whose attention seemed to be pretty fully occupied in holding on, as the shabby old cart bumped and bounced, now with a wheel tilted up on the curb, now with it in the depths of the gutter; for the horse had been unduly impressed by the music and was taking short cuts on its way home.

"Why, that is Jerry, and Hester Dayrell is driving. There'll be a smash in a minute, and the horse will be ruined!" exclaimed George Poyntz, jumping into his gig,

which stood at the bottom of the steps in charge of a boy. And flinging the lad sixpence, he started off in hot pursuit of the flying vehicle, now almost out of sight.

"He will be of use in picking up the pieces, that is all," said Mr. Holtum to himself, as he watched the staid cob ambling up the street in a poor emulation of Jerry's mad gallop.

But fortunately there were no pieces to pick up, Hester being able to keep Jerry well in the middle of the road, which luckily was unusually clear of other traffic just then. A stout policeman in Wingrove Street called on her to stop, intending to prosecute her for furious driving, but she only shook her head and rattled past, holding the reins in both hands, and using her utmost endeavours to soothe the frightened horse.

Failing her, the policeman fastened on to George Poyntz, who, with whip and rein, was urging the cob to greater speed, and running nimbly into the road this over-zealous functionary succeeded in stopping that gentleman and taking his name and address, after which he dismissed him with a caution. This state of things did not tend to sweeten George's temper, he being already greatly irritated by his apprehensions for Jerry's safety. To Hester herself he hardly gave a thought; but the colt had a monetary value, and was considered accordingly.

Beyond Stourbridge the road rose in a steady, unbroken ascent for more than two miles, and Hester knew that if she succeeded in reaching the foot of this rise in safety, she would be in a fair way to regain the mastery over Jerry. By a series of miracles they did reach it unharmed, and after half-a-mile of this against-collar-work the colt slackened his pace, coming finally to a walk before the top of the rise was reached.

During all this time, Mr. Boscombe, Dr. Stapleton's assistant, had held on with both hands to the side of the cart, prepared to spring out should a collision appear inevitable,

and it was with a deep sigh of relief and satisfaction that he relaxed his grip when Jerry slowed down to a walk.

"Rather breathless, wasn't it?" he remarked calmly, mentally congratulating himself on having sat still, and not in any way forced a situation that at one time appeared to be eminently critical.

"More than rather, I think," replied Hester, panting a little from the excitement. "I wonder what Uncle George would have said if he could have seen me."

"He did, and is even now in hot pursuit, if he has not come to grief himself, that is," said Mr. Boscombe, with the barest suspicion of a laugh.

"How do you know?" inquired Hester in surprise.

"I saw them—Mr. Poyntz and Holtum the lawyer—standing together on Holtum's doorstep as we rushed that corner. I think they were admiring the way in which we cut the corners off. And then Mr. Poyntz ran down the steps, and jumping into his trap, came pelting after, but his pace was nothing to ours, and I saw no more."

"He will never forgive me, and yet I couldn't help Jerry bolting; he behaved like a lamb until that barrel-organ jarred on his nerves," said Hester with a sigh. Then she gave her attention to the reins again, for they had by this time breasted the hill, and the house of Swarling lay in sight below.

"Fifty-one minutes and a half, Miss Hester. There ain't a man on the farm as could have done it better!" exclaimed Jim Saxby, coming forward to meet them, as Jerry trotted decorously in at the gate.

"We have had to cut it fine in more ways than one, I can tell you, Jim," laughed Hester, with a little forgiveable pride in her exploit. Then she descended to *terra firma* once more, and hurried the young doctor away to the house, staying herself to give Jim a word of advice about getting Jerry rubbed down and stabled before his master arrived on the scene.

But it was fully a quarter of an hour before George

Poyntz drove up, and by that time Jerry was placidly munching clover, with not a hair of his glossy brown coat awry, thanks to Jim's quickness and skill in the matter of grooming him down.

The cob, however, was covered with dust and flecked with foam, for between anger and anxiety George had driven home in reckless haste.

"Why, deary me, the poor beast is pretty nigh used up. A sight wuss nor Jerry was, and he did the journey there and back in fifty-one minutes and a half, and brought the doctor back as well!" exclaimed the diplomatic Jim, forbearing for the time any mention of Miss Hester's share in the business.

"The doctor? What is the matter?" demanded George Poyntz, with a sudden spasm of fear at his heart.

"It's Miss Allie; they do say as she has broken every bone in her body, and Miss Hester went off to fetch the doctor for her," explained Jim, carefully suppressing the fact that Miss Hester's bicycle had been the cause of the disaster.

George Poyntz turned away to the house like a man in a dream. His children were very dear to him, the madcap Allie dearest of all. At the back door he met Jane, who burst upon him with the news he had already heard; but he thrust her aside and strode on, hearing with a shiver the loud unrestrained sobs of Flossie, whom Susan was striving to console in the kitchen.

"A truly marvellous escape, Mrs. Poyntz. A few bruises and a broken collar-bone; the miracle is that she was not killed outright," Mr. Boscombe was saying as George Poyntz came in at the door, and joined the group round the couch.

Allie was conscious now, and crying quietly in sheer thankfulness at finding herself still alive; but Hester had slipped away, and was having a fit of hysterics all to herself in the next room.

"What is the matter?" demanded George in a husky tone, edging himself forward into the group.

"Allie was riding Hester's bicycle, and fell; a dreadful fall it was, and we thought she was almost killed," replied Mrs. Poyntz, breaking down now and crying with her head on her husband's shoulder.

"Where is Hester?" he asked, understanding now her reckless driving of the colt, and shivering anew at the remembrance of the bumping, swaying cart, and madly galloping horse, as Hester had guided it past Mr. Holtum's house and safely out of the city.

"I—I don't know," faltered his wife, fearful lest he should disgrace himself by a scene with Hester, after the risk she had run in driving the colt.

But it so happened that quarrelling with his niece was the last thing that George Poyntz would have thought of at that moment. A very lively sense of gratitude had taken possession of him instead; and he even omitted to remember that Hester was in the wrong in the first instance in having given Allie permission to mount her bicycle.

Leaving his wife in ignorance of his state of mind on the matter, he presently went out of the room with the intention of finding Hester, and was about to inquire where she was from the maids in the kitchen, when glancing through the open hall door he saw her stooping over the fragments of her broken wheel.

She had got over her hysterical fit by this time, and was gathering up the bits of the damaged machine, in order that they might be sent into Stourbridge by the carrier. When this was done she meant to slip away quietly, and walk back herself, feeling too shaken and unnerved to risk an encounter with her uncle just then.

But he was close beside her before she heard him coming, and there was no possibility of avoiding him. She could only draw herself erect and wait for the expected outburst.

It did not come, however; instead, he was holding out

his hands to her in a friendly fashion, and saying in what for him was really an amiable tone, "I'm more obliged to you, Hester, than I can say, for what you did for Allie this morning; but it was a fearful risk to run; why, I should think twice before I drove that colt into Stourbridge myself, for a noise of any sort sets him bolting."

Hester crimsoned hotly over face and neck, and for one rebellious half-minute was inclined to put her hands behind her back; then her good sense prevailed over the innate naughtiness of her disposition, and she said, instead, as she took her uncle's proffered hand, "You mustn't thank me, Uncle George, seeing that it was my fault Allie came by her hurt. And it was more by good luck than good management that we got home safely, for I couldn't hold Jerry in when he bolted; it was as much as I could do to keep him in the road at all."

"The policeman tried to stop you, and, failing that, is going to summon me instead," George answered grimly, not disposed to let Hester off entirely without reproach, despite the change in his sentiments towards her.

"Never mind, Uncle George; I'll pay the fine, if it isn't too heavy," she answered with a laugh; and so the hatchet was buried between them for a time at least, and the germ of a kindlier feeling had opportunity to grow and develop in their hearts.

CHAPTER X.

LADY ANSTRUTHER'S BEQUEST.

IT was just at this time, when the question of the possession of Swarling Tower seemed to be more than ever a doubtful quantity, that the dowager Lady Anstruther died, leaving a princely legacy to the funds of the Stourbridge Museum.

But attached to the bequest were minute details concerning the use to which it was to be put, her ladyship not choosing that her money should be spent in acquiring a magnificent building in which to store the city's treasures of nature and art, but preferring that it should go to purchase more curiosities, with specimens of rare creatures, both of birds, beasts, and fishes. She even went so far as to name many of the things which she desired to have placed in the collection, though where they could be stored, in the present crowded condition of the museum, was a problem the directors found it hard to solve.

Among other things the deceased Countess had bargained for, in her letter of instructions, was a specimen of the orang-outang, which she looked upon as the missing link in the Darwinian theory, going even further than that notable professor, and declaring the creature to be but a lower class of the great human brotherhood, and possessed of intellect like the superior animal man.

There was a great clamour of conflicting opinions among the learned gentlemen who sat on the directing council of the museum; some declaring Lady Anstruther to be a scholar of immense attainments, and others as hotly averring that she

was not far removed in mental capacity from her favourite study, the "missing link." But all combined in the determination to keep the money so bequeathed, even though the ancient fossils and pre-Adamic bones, now gracing the museum shelves, had to go to mend the roads, in order to make room for the pythons, alligators, and orang-outangs stipulated for by her ladyship.

Then Professor Pringle was appealed to as an authority on the best mode of getting the required specimens. And he, smelling travel and adventure in the business, as a war-horse sniffs the battle from afar, offered to personally undertake the work of procuring them. This offer was made on the spur of the moment, and without a thought of the tears poor Mrs. Pringle would shed if the choice of the council should fall upon him; but once done, it could not be undone, and the Professor awaited the decision with no little inward trepidation as to its result upon his amiable spouse.

Hester Dayrell was much engrossed by affairs at Swarling Tower during this juncture, and was often absent from the museum for days together, Mrs. Poyntz being so seriously ill from worry and the shock of Allie's accident as to cause her family grave uneasiness. It was wonderful how every one of the household looked to Hester for comfort and help at this trying time, and half-unconsciously, half from necessity, she had by degrees slipped back into her old position of mistress of the house. The servants came to her for orders, the children looked up to her as the only available authority, and Mrs. Poyntz was dependent on her for the care and kindness that a robust daughter would give to an ailing mother; while the master of the house, between worry on account of the succession and anxiety concerning the health of his wife, was driven to the verge of distraction, and was of no use to any one in the matter of comfort and health.

Hester would have stayed at Swarling entirely whilst this troublous condition lasted, but she could not wholly neglect her work at the museum and the course of study upon which

the Professor had launched her. But her visits to Stourbridge were mostly flying ones; she would drive over for a lesson perhaps, and when it was over hurry back to Swarling, scarcely staying to exchange more than half-a-dozen sentences with the Professor or Mrs. Pringle. On certain days of the week she had to put in a longer time at the particular work for which she was training, and then she would remain for a meal at the Professor's house, learning from the table-talk the topics just then of most interest in the city.

But strangely enough she did not hear of Lady Anstruther's bequest, and the conditions attaching to it, until the council had made overtures to the Professor concerning the procuring of specimens and Mrs. Pringle was weeping at the prospect of her husband's journey.

"Where will he go first?" demanded Hester, her colour coming and going, and her heart beating quicker with excitement.

"To that awful country that killed poor Arthur Poyntz, Borneo," sobbed Mrs. Pringle, crying all the harder now that there was a prospect of getting some sympathy. But alas for her expectations! Hester not merely forbore to offer condolences, she instead added insult to injury by shrieking aloud in ecstatic jubilation, and rushing from the room like a wild creature.

Mrs. Pringle felt rather scandalized; she had been so fond of quoting "Miss Dayrell's good breeding and refined self-control" to her particular friends, and here she was behaving like a vulgar hoyden, or an untamed school-girl. And the Professor's wife forgot her own grief in the composition of a short homily on decorum, which she intended to deliver for Hester's benefit on the very first opportunity that presented itself.

Hester had rushed from the dining-room, where Mrs. Pringle had made her tearful confidences, out through the communicating passage to the museum, in search of the Professor.

There were quite a number of people in the reading room when she looked in, but he was not among them, and retreating hastily, she ran up the broad staircase two steps at a time, hoping to find him in his private room.

But he was not there either, and she was going back to the house to gain tidings of his whereabouts from Mrs. Pringle, when a sound of voices in the big room attracted her attention, and she peeped cautiously in at the open doors.

The Professor was discoursing learnedly on the evolution of species to Mr. Holtum, the lawyer, and seeing them together, and no one else present, she walked in at the doors, and cut short one of the Professor's most eloquent periods.

"Mrs. Pringle says that you are going to Borneo to find an orang-outang, and I want you to take me with you."

The Professor came out of the clouds to stare at her in profound astonishment, whilst the lawyer looked at her with much the same critical survey that he bestowed on the many curiosities grouped on tables and shelves for exhibition.

Hester drew herself erect and coloured furiously under the concentrated stare of the two men.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said shortly; "I am sorry I forgot my manners, but Mrs. Pringle's news took my breath away."

"And so you came here to take ours away also," said the lawyer calmly, and with the least possible suspicion of a smile dragging at the corners of his mouth.

She let his remark go unanswered, turning with wistful appeal in her eyes to the Professor. "You will take me with you, won't you, Professor? I should be such a help to you; indeed I don't know how you would do without me, for you can't always read your own handwriting yourself."

The lawyer laughed aloud at this candid statement, but the Professor mused, rubbing his hands doubtfully.

"Why do you so especially wish to go, Miss Hester? Is it from an unselfish desire to assist Professor Pringle, and save him from the pitfalls of his untranslatable penmanship; or

has a desire for travel and adventure anything to do with it?" asked the lawyer.

"Neither the one nor the other in this case, Mr. Holtum. I want to find the half-moon girl and Uncle Arthur's will," she replied, looking steadily at him, prepared to face his incredulous merriment or that keener weapon of satire.

"Yes, yes, Hester, it would be a good idea," exclaimed the Professor, who by this time had recovered sufficiently from his surprise at the proposal to be able to grasp its advantages to himself.

The lawyer, however, had an objection to raise, which, had it been made a few months before, would have seemed insuperable to Hester. "You are an interested party in the finding, Miss Hester, and should not be permitted to go on a quest like that without the consent of your Uncle George, whose interests are equally involved," he said gravely.

Hester's face cleared, and her eyes grew eager. "I do not think there will be much to fear in the matter of opposition from Uncle George now. He cannot inherit, knowing there is a will in existence, and he would be thankful by this time to have the suspense ended anyhow."

"The better thing to do before deciding will be to consult Mr. Poyntz on the matter. Even should he consent, it is rather a wild goose chase for a young lady to undertake, and Borneo is a big country to search in, though it does not amount to much in geography books," Mr. Holtum said, taking out his watch and discovering that he must hurry away to keep an appointment for which he would otherwise be late.

Hester had been driven into Stourbridge that morning by her cousin Steve, and had gone straight to her lesson at the taxidermist's, coming on to the museum when it was over. Here she was greeted by Mrs. Pringle's tidings, whilst eating some luncheon to fortify her for an hour's grind at practical anatomy, followed by another hour at the classification of fossils.

But the luncheon had been interrupted and forgotten, the anatomy bade fair to share the same fate, whilst the fossils were nowhere in it, when the Professor and his pupil sat down to discuss the proposed expedition in detail. Referring constantly to her Uncle Arthur's book on the fauna of the big island, the Professor told Hester of the wonderful natural orchards, where the orang-outang has his home, and discoursed long and learnedly on the strange creature's habits and manner of life. And Hester sat with her eyes fixed on her master's face, though it is open to question whether she gathered the sense of what he said, her thoughts being occupied with that other, to her, more important object of the journey, the finding of the half-moon girl, who had been her Uncle Arthur's friend, perhaps his wife.

The dinner-bell broke up the one-sided discussion, in which only the Professor had spoken, and Hester had forgotten to listen. And they went down together, absorbed still by the project in hand and with never a thought of the neglected anatomy and the fossils that had not been touched.

Mrs. Pringle was red-eyed but dignified, and she looked with resigned toleration on her husband's shabby coat and ruffled hair. Dinner was served at half-past one, and she always dressed for it; that is to say, her morning gown was abandoned and richer attire donned, in which she would afterwards make calls or receive visitors. But the Professor was wont to come straight from his study to his food, with no more preparation than to stand and reverently say grace.

To Hester, the good lady intended being frigidly polite, but when the girl came with a prettily-worded apology for her unceremonious behaviour, she had to relax from her intended coldness and receive the apologies in the spirit in which they were made.

But she held up her hands in horror at Hester's suggestion to accompany the Professor. "My dear, it would never do! you would be exposed to endless unpleasantness and misconstruction; there would be no one to take care of you, either."

"The Professor could take care of me; I am sure he would make a charming chaperone, if I needed one; but girls who earn their living are not supposed to require looking after in the same sense as girls who do not, so I should be perfectly safe." Thus replied Hester coaxingly, knowing it was wisest to gain as many allies as possible.

"The Professor cannot take care of himself," said his wife mournfully, with a reproving look at his untidy hair and rumpled collar. She was so exquisitely neat herself that these things jarred on her nerves, causing considerable irritation sometimes, though she honestly tried not to give way to it.

"Then I could take care of him. What a good idea! Unless indeed you are going yourself?" and Hester paused mischievously, knowing well Mrs. Pringle's aversion to travelling.

"I? Oh no, my dear, I have no thought of going; the council were very kind in offering to make arrangements for me to accompany the Professor, but I declined. Hard as the separation will be to bear, it will be more durable than the toil and terror of journeying among savages like the Borneans must be," and the good lady's handkerchief came into active play again.

"In that case, what a comfort it will be to you to know that I am with him, to see that he doesn't get his feet wet, or go out without his umbrella when it is raining hard," continued Hester in a wheedling tone.

"Indeed, it would be a comfort, if only you were a boy," sighed Mrs. Pringle, whereupon Hester flounced angrily upon her chair, and burst into indignant remonstrances on the limitations of her sex, which aroused the Professor from the reverie into which he had fallen, and made him inquire what was wrong.

"Everything is wrong, Professor, when one has the misfortune to be a girl," she sighed dolorously.

"Ministering angels, my dear, except when they miss their vocation and degenerate into something worse," he said

succinctly; whereat Hester clapped her hands in childish glee.

"It is the very thing I'm yearning for, Professor, to be a ministering angel; you will need one, I am sure, to look after your comforts in a land where it rains six days out of seven pretty nearly all the year round."

"You will be a great help to me certainly, and it is very kind of you to be so willing to go. I had thought of engaging some one to accompany me as clerk or amanuensis, but you will suit me better than a stranger, because I am used to you," and the Professor resumed his reverie and said no more.

Hester laughed gleefully, and turned to Mrs. Pringle. "Are you convinced now that it is better for me to go?" she asked.

"If the Professor needs you, what can I say?" replied that lady, "but I do not take back my previous statements about the unpleasant notoriety and misconstruction that will compass the undertaking for you, and girls as a rule do well to avoid these things."

"I am the exception to the rule," said Hester with compressed lips. "If I am able to bring back Uncle Arthur's will, it will more than repay me for the unpleasantness you speak of."

CHAPTER XI.

COUSIN GEORGE.

BY infinite coaxing, tact, and good management, Hester Dayrell carried her point, and one fine morning early in August stepped on board an outward-bound steamer lying ready for departure in one of the London docks.

A small crowd of friends and well-wishers had assembled to see the travellers off, but these had chiefly gathered round Professor Pringle, and Hester's attention was mostly occupied with her Uncle George, who had come to town on his own responsibility to see the last of his niece. In a very mixed frame of mind was George Poyntz with regard to this expedition, and on its first being mooted he had railed against it hotly enough. But later on, when calmer reflection had shown him that he could not inherit Swarling under present conditions, whilst there was evidence to prove the existence of another will, he submitted to the inevitable, and even went far enough to declare that since some one must go in search of the document, he would rather it should be Hester Dayrell than any one else.

And he had come to London with a manifest purpose in his heart, which he had been secretly ashamed to give utterance to before. It was still undeclared when he stood on deck with his niece, and the agonies of indecision held him in thrall as he fidgeted, fumed, and fretted, amid the noise and bustle of impending departure.

Hester was puzzled as to the cause of his manifest uneasiness, for though his manner to her had been so much more friendly of late, she was not vain enough to attribute

his unrest to any grief of parting with herself, and was not a little curious to discover the secret of his perturbation.

"Do you wish that you were coming, too, Uncle George?" she asked with a laugh, as the increasing throng by the gangway drove them further astern in search of a less crowded spot.

"Yes—no—well, I don't know that it matters much, as you are going;" and he paused, hesitated, then burst out abruptly, "Look here, Hester, I'm going to speak plainly for once, and throw myself on your mercy. Supposing you couldn't have Swarling for yourself, wouldn't you rather see me have it than a stranger?"

"Why, yes, Uncle George, and indeed I am beginning to wish that granfer had left it to you straight off, and saved all this bother and worry," she replied, sincerely enough, turning her open, candid face towards him.

"It is what he ought to have done, Hester, though perhaps I am not the right one to say it; and anyhow it doesn't do to quarrel with the dead." And again George Poyntz paused, irresolute, and wiped the perspiration from his heated brow.

"What is it that you want me to do, Uncle George?" she asked, for the warning bells were beginning to ring and people were streaming back over the gangway once more.

"If you find that will, Hester—I've my doubts about its existence, mind you—but if you do, and the property is to come neither to me nor to you, have an accident with it, my girl; such things are easy enough if you only think them out carefully;" his voice was hoarse and uncertain, and his eyes would not meet hers, but uneasily sought the ground.

She started a little, the iniquity of the proposition almost frightening her, because similar ideas had before now found expression in her own heart; but controlling her indignation and emotion, she said quietly enough, "I should not know how the will was worded, Uncle George, for Mr. Holtum says it would probably not hold valid if the seals are broken before it reaches England, and I might be destroying my own chances,

don't you see? if I ventured on tampering with it whilst it is in my possession."

George Poyntz growled audibly, saying likewise many things that happily were inarticulate, if not entirely inaudible; and then he turned away with the feeling of a man who had staked a fortune—and lost it.

"Uncle, you will not go away like this," she pleaded, plucking at his sleeve. "Do you not see how my hands are tied, how I have no choice but to be honest in the matter?"

"Aye, aye, I only hope that you'll find honesty to be the best policy in this case, and so prove the old proverb a true one," he muttered in bitter savagery.

"I don't like to part like this, Uncle George; suppose anything were to happen to me, you would always be sorry that you did not give me a kinder good-bye," she pleaded, the unwonted tears rising in her eyes, and welling over to roll down her cheeks.

He softened a little at that, for he still remembered the risk she had run in driving Jerry to fetch the doctor for Allie. Besides, if a tragic fate were to overtake her on her travels there would be one claimant removed from his path, in which case he could afford to be magnanimous in his farewell to her.

"Good-bye, Hester, I can only say that I hope if the will is found it will tend to the righting of the wrong. At least it will end the suspense, and that is fast making an old man of me," he said grudgingly, as he held out his hand to her.

She took it in both of hers, holding it tightly for one moment, and saying in a quavering tone, very unlike her ordinary brisk accents, "Good-bye, Uncle George, and please think as kindly of me as you can, whatever happens."

To this he made no reply. Indeed, there was no time; they were already beginning to pull up the gangways, when, breaking through the crowd of tearful and farewell-ing passengers, George Poyntz sprang on shore, and moodily watched the vessel slip from her moorings, and move slowly

out of dock. It was a bitter mortification to him to remember that he had shown his hand so plainly to Hester Dayrell, and gained nothing from the showing, except to put himself in her power from henceforth; not a pleasant reflection to any man in like circumstances, but especially maddening to a proud, selfish nature such as his.

From Hester, his thoughts went to the lawyer, whose cleverness had provided against the very contingency he had endeavoured to bring about. Mr. Holtum, far-seeing man and astute lawyer that he was, had guessed that George Poyntz, in his position of next-of-kin, might make an attempt to prevent his brother's will from being brought to England, and had therefore been thankful to let Hester be the emissary sent in search of it, since her interest might be involved in its production. And then he had further safeguarded it by that hint of invalidity should the seals be broken. George Poyntz laughed aloud with a stentorian ha, ha, of unmirthful scorn, as he pondered the situation, thereby frightening some nervous females standing close by, and inciting an officious constable to order him to move on.

Hester was miserable for exactly five minutes after parting with her uncle; then, putting her handkerchief resolutely away, she immediately began to feel better. Ten minutes later she was taking an appreciative interest in her surroundings, whilst by the time half an hour had gone by she was laughing as merrily as though no clouds had obscured her starting.

The Professor was an old traveller, made wise by many years of experience, and with him for a companion, Hester knew she stood the best possible chance of getting all the good there was to be gained from the voyage, whilst he was made happy by having some one to whom he could impart instruction, teaching being now, as ever, the ruling passion of his life.

Pacing the deck side by side, as they were towed down the river, the Professor and Hester discussed their plan of

campaign, and mapped out the *voyage* into sections of instruction on a wide variety of subjects. But they might have saved themselves the labour, for, ere twenty-four hours had passed, poor Hester was the hapless victim of seasickness, and was kept a prisoner in her cabin until Suez was reached. The only course of instruction by which she benefited during the early days of the journey was taken at the hands of the kindly stewardess, who taught her how to sleep comfortably in her berth, and to keep from rolling out when the motion of the vessel became violent. For, summer though it was, they encountered a storm in the Bay of Biscay which lasted three days, a fearful experience for the uninitiated, and one which made even seasoned travellers tremble.

At Suez, however, Hester emerged from her compulsory retirement, very wan and washed-out in appearance, but alert and eager to enjoy the strange sights and sounds all around her.

The voyage was no more remarkable than hundreds of others; the days passed with the usual routine of seaboard existence, and in due course they arrived in the big harbour of Singapore, their first halting place, and where they were to remain for some days before proceeding on their journey to Borneo.

By a mistaken impression that had its foundation in ship-gossip, Hester was supposed to be the daughter of Professor Pringle, or at least his step-daughter, and having denied the rumour until she was tired, Hester let it alone and permitted her fellow passengers to talk to her about the Herr papa without further disclaimer or denial, even delighting in the supposed relationship, since it served as an effectual shield against the impertinences of prying curiosity.

Some of these ship-board companions were staying in the same hotel as the Professor and Hester in Singapore, and thus the idea took firmer root, and spread to the new acquaintances with which the freemasonry of travel every day brought them in contact.

At table d'hôte one evening there was an unusual crowd of diners. An American vessel had arrived in port shortly before, bringing besides her own complement of passengers the shipwrecked crew and about twenty passengers who had been rescued in the Sea of Bengal from a British merchantman that had become disabled, and was on the point of foundering when the timely help arrived.

These unfortunates, as a matter of course, attracted considerable attention, Hester being among the number of those interested in watching the newcomers. But she was presently surprised and confused to find that she herself was eliciting the notice of one of the officers, a bronzed young man of twenty or thereabouts. Meeting the gaze of this individual, she promptly averted her own and became instantly absorbed in her dinner, not venturing so much as to steal another glance in that direction.

She was leaving the table later to sit with the Professor on the verandah, when a familiar voice at her elbow said, "It is Hester Dayrell, unless I am dreaming!"

She turned with a quick exclamation of surprise and incredulous delight.

"George, and I did not even recognise you!"

"Probably because I have grown so much better-looking," he said with a laugh; then asked again in a wondering tone, "You are certain about yourself, Hester? There's no mistake, is there?"

"What do you mean?" she demanded, her eyes dancing with the same light that was reflected in his.

"It is so wonderful to drop on you in this part of the world that I can't be quite sure and certain as to your identity yet," he said, looking down at her with a comical expression of doubt on his sun-burned face.

"I am myself, without any doubt. What can I do to convince you?" she asked, smiling back at him.

He pondered a moment, as though settling some temporary hesitation, then said calmly, "We are cousins; you might

kiss me, Hester, and so remove any lingering doubt from my mind."

"I am much more likely to box your ears for daring to even suggest such a thing," she retorted haughtily, drawing herself erect, and regarding him in cold displeasure.

"A thousand pardons, Cousin Hester; now that you look cross I have no doubt whatever; it was your exceeding amiability of expression that bewildered me; I am not used to it, you know," he said in a scoffing tone.

Her face relaxed from its sudden displeasure, and she asked, "How is it that you are here, Cousin George? I thought the *Fairy Queen* was not to leave Calcutta for another three weeks?"

"Nor is she. Indeed, at this moment she is berthed for repairs, and I was shipped as third officer on the *Cassandra* at the last moment before sailing, their third officer having been killed the day before."

"And you were wrecked? Oh, George, how worried Aunt Alice will be when she hears of it."

"Poor little mother! She does take such things to heart uncommonly. But I say, Hester, why are you here, and who is yonder old buffer whom I heard you addressing as Herr papa just now?"

"One question at a time, if you please, and I will answer the last one first. That gentleman, whom you are pleased to call an old buffer, is Professor Pringle, of the Stourbridge Museum, my guardian, and the best friend I have in the world; I thought you knew him. Come with me, and I will introduce you," and she moved on down the wide corridor, between the banks of ferns and brilliant tropical flowers, to the verandah, whither the Professor had already betaken himself.

Young George Poyntz followed her with the sensation of one walking in a dream. It was the same imperious Cousin Hester whose slave he had been when a boy, and yet she was different; altered and oldened, distractingly pretty still,

but with a hint of care about her and a firmer compression about the self-willed lines of her little mouth.

Professor Pringle was cordial, even gracious, to Hester's sailor cousin, and the two soon slipped into an absorbing conversation on the wonders of the sea, whilst Hester sat near and listened. But George had not yet satisfied his curiosity concerning her presence in Singapore, and presently harked back to his original question, which had not yet been answered.

"Why are you here, Hester? Have the powers that be decided that you have the most right to Swarling, and you are touring on the strength of it? Or are you putting as much distance as possible between yourself and father?"

"I told you one question at a time, Cousin George, and you are pelting me with them at the rate of three in a breath," she retorted.

"I am waiting to be enlightened," he said in a penitent tone.

"I am Professor Pringle's assistant, and some day, if I live long enough, and work hard enough, I shall be Professor Dayrell myself," she answered in all the swelling pride of independence.

"Which you won't," he interpolated in a tone of sturdy disbelief.

"I am not lazy, if that is what you mean to imply," she rejoined coldly.

He waved his hands with a deprecating gesture. "Not a bit of it; I am such a boor, Cousin Hester. I was merely commenting on your first statement, that you would do great things if you lived long enough."

"Do I look like dying?" she asked sharply, piqued at finding herself no match for him now in a warfare of words, where formerly she had had things all her own way.

He gazed reflectively over the verandah railings into the open space below, where some Bugis sailors were quarrelling with a Malay merchant, and his voice sank to a confidential

undertone: “‘The good die young,’ you know, Cousin Hester, and that was why I feared you might not realize your ambitions.”

She was really angry now, and mortified too by the knowledge that he was no longer her abject slave, but a grown man, emancipated from the thraldom of his boyhood, and daring to make fun of her. Rising from her chair she said freezingly, “I am tired, I will go to bed, I think; shall I say good-bye now, Cousin George, or will you be here to-morrow?”

“I cannot tell,” he replied with unmoved gravity, “so perhaps it will be safer to say farewell. Good-bye, Cousin Hester,” and he held out his hand.

“Good-bye,” she said in an offended tone, just letting her fingers touch his, and she walked away with her head carried stiffly erect.

George Poyntz laughed a little over her stately departure, then drawing his chair closer to the Professor’s, took up the conversation at the point where it had been interrupted by his questioning of Hester.

The two men sat for a long time together, the Professor won by the frank manliness of the young sailor, and George, on his part, attracted by the Stourbridge magnate, of whom he had often heard, but whom he had never before had the pleasure of meeting.

From generalities the talk veered round to personalities, and the young man heard for the first time of the fresh perplexities that had arisen concerning the heirship of the Swarling estate.

“And Hester has come out to find the will?” asked young George, incredulous amazement dominating every feature.

“Practically, yes. She poses as my assistant, of course, and is really helpful and indispensable to me; but it is to search for the will that she has come,” replied the Professor.

“It was madness to permit it!” ejaculated George with so much earnestness that the Professor was instantly affronted.

"Your language is strong and not too complimentary, young man," he remarked severely.

"I beg your pardon, sir. My language did seem strong, I daresay; but if you knew as much of Borneo as I do, you would be ready to admit that it is certainly not a desirable place to take a lady to travel in."

"Have you been there?" asked the Professor, an anxious line just showing between his eyes.

George reddened. "No, sir, I can't say I have, but I have met plenty of fellows in my time who know the country well, and none of them would have deemed it advisable to take their mothers or sisters there."

"Your Uncle Arthur speaks of the inhabitants in the main as being gentle, kindly folk, hospitable to strangers, and generous to a fault," objected the Professor, not willing to give way to apprehension until good and sufficient cause for alarm had been shown.

"Perhaps he was fortunate in the people he came across. Still, it is an incontestable fact that head-hunting is carried on, if not as openly as in the past, yet enough so to make existence there somewhat of a risk. And you will have to leave Hester alone at the mercy of the townsfolk, whilst you go to hunt for your specimens in the forests, perhaps two or three weeks' journey distant."

"I should not leave her, but take her along too; she is young and active, fully capable of bearing as much fatigue as I can endure even," rejoined the Professor stoutly, though inwardly quaking at the responsibility he had so rashly undertaken.

"Granted, but life is cruelly uncertain in those forest wilds, where malaria lurks in every swamp, to say nothing of other dangers. Imagine Hester's fate if death should overtake you there."

The Professor hemmed and hawed in pretended disdain, flourished about too, as though justly indignant at this imputation of danger and disaster, but finally caved in,

inquiring uneasily, "Supposing your fears for your cousin to be well within the range of probabilities, what would you advise me to do? I cannot return to Europe with my missing unfulfilled."

"Certainly not. But you could leave Hester here in charge of some responsible person. Frau Gildersmid would look after her, I daresay, or there's the clergyman of the Lutheran Church on the hill at the back of the town; he has a wife, I believe. Then, if you would care to have me, I would accompany you to Borneo, and help you to hunt for orchids, orang-outangs, or whatever you have specially come to look for. We could take the half-moon girl on our way if she is still in existence, and get all the business done neatly. What do you think, sir?"

"I think," replied the Professor slowly, "that however much you may know about Borneo, or any other subject, it is very plain that you know absolutely nothing about your cousin, Hester Dayrell. To propose such a thing to her would only be to strengthen her determination to oppose you at all hazards. No, no, young man, your idea of leaving Hester safely chaperoned in Singapore sounds all right in the abstract, but it would not bear testing."

"A girl like that would surely see the wisdom of avoiding grave risks, and of—of, in short, of doing what she is told," insisted George, with an assumption of manly superiority immensely diverting to his auditor.

"Some girls might, though I am not sure. But Hester,"—and here the Professor laughed softly—"Hester is not to be controlled by any ordinary methods; when she makes up her mind to do a thing, why she—does it."

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE HANDS OF THE HEAD-HUNTERS.

IT was at the end of the rainy season, and the forests of Limbau were more or less under water, the deeper valleys resembling wide rivers and raging cascades, where the water came tumbling down from the hills above.

The Rajah had returned from Brunei to his own domains, bringing with him his young wife Dewa, and Song his daughter. The Paw was to have accompanied him, but that worthy was still busily searching for the Pontianak diamond, and declared himself unable to leave the city.

For this, Song was devoutly thankful. Dewa alone was sufficiently hard to live with, but when it came to the Paw and his two wives, with their numerous children, existence became almost unendurable. Since his marriage, the Rajah had developed a great liking for his kinsman's society, and was constantly with him—that is, when the Paw's active search for the diamond left him free for any other occupation.

The Rajah's marriage had changed him in other respects also, and he no longer cared to have his daughter with him. Song therefore found herself relegated to the position of household drudge.

She ate and slept with the women of the household now, whilst Dewa, the bride, enjoyed the state and comfort that formerly had been the monopoly of Song. The women were fairly kind in the main, and as they were fond of her, did not unduly put upon her, but the teasing that she had to bear because of the tattooing on neck and arms was enough to ruffle a more amiable person than she had ever professed to be.

Dewa had been tattooed by an expert before they left the city, and being a married woman was immensely proud of the adornment, which was executed on a very elaborate and fanciful scale. She wore her sarongs cut low to show the markings on her neck, and was continually flourishing her arms about, to display the designs on her wrists.

The Rajah's house at Limbau was a long, low, wooden structure, built on piles, against the side of a hill. In front was a broad river and wide-stretching plains, the latter now a vast lake which showed tops of trees or tufts of rattan here and there; whilst at the back, spreading for many leagues, was primeval forest, where the orang-outang had its home, and the Poonan tribe lived and hunted, rarely emerging to show themselves to the civilisation of the open spaces. A peculiar tribe the Poonan were, and mostly hostile to the neighbouring peoples. But young Mahadra Poonan, the eldest son of the reigning chief, professed to be of a more sociable nature; and setting aside the traditions of his forefathers, bought himself a wife from the Paw of Limbau, who had daughters and to spare, and was thankful to dispose of them to any one who would pay cash down.

But Mahadra was not allowed to wed until he had satisfied his family that he possessed sufficient bravery and resource in his own person to be fit to rule a house; and to do this he had in accordance with the custom of the tribe to bring home a certain number of heads in proof thereof.

Thus it was that Kamalendo, the intended husband of Song, had fallen, and Mahadra had carried away his own bride in triumph to the forest solitudes that he called home.

Whether his success in head-hunting had demoralised the young chief of the Poonan, or whether there were other young men of his father's court who aspired to connubial felicity, did not appear, but lately the raids on unsuspecting villages had been more numerous, and many a headless body in the vicinity bore mute witness to the cruel rapacity of the Poonan.

Of this, the Rajah had been duly informed on his arrival,

and collecting his fighting men, had gone forth in battle array against these destroyers of the public peace. Nothing had come of these expeditions, however, saving the amount of game with which the warriors returned heavily laden from the forest depths; and gradually the neighbourhood grew quiet again, and every available worker was pressed into service in the cultivation of fields and garden-ground.

The Rajah had always been very proud of the agricultural activity of his people, and although it was of course beneath his own dignity to touch a hoe, or a rake, he always insisted that the women of his household should bear their part among the toilers. Song's mother had planted yams and hoed corn in company with her servants, and Song herself had always done her part also. But the lovely Dewa, confident in her own powers of fascination and general attractiveness, flatly refused to ruin her complexion and spoil her figure by labouring in the fields.

In vain the Rajah stormed and insisted. Dewa met his anger with a mocking smile—and remained at home, resting from the heat in the pleasant darkness of the shaded rooms, or adorning herself for further conquest.

She was thus engaged one brilliant morning, lounging by the open door of her chamber on a pile of attap mats, when a cautious step on the jambattan beyond made her start in sudden alarm.

The village was almost deserted that morning; one or two old women were bathing with the children in a shady bay a little further down the river, but all the able-bodied women, including those of the Rajah's household and Song, had gone to the rice fields a mile away, and would not be back until sunset, whilst the men were also absent on a pig-hunt.

Her breath came in short, painful pants as she sprang to her feet, looking vainly about for a place of refuge to which she might fly. But there was none, the chamber having only that one door which opened outwards on to the jambattan, where she had heard the footsteps which frightened her. She

was not entirely devoid of courage, though habitual indolence had weakened this and other good qualities to a serious extent; and finding herself with no loop-hole of escape, she seized a kriss that hung on the wall and stood at bay waiting for the intruder to come on.

This, for a few moments, he seemed disinclined to do, and Dewa's brief spurt of courage ebbing fast, she was on the point of sinking to the floor in a swoon, when suddenly a figure, hideous enough to frighten any one, appeared on the threshold of the chamber, not six yards away from where she was cowering in her fear.

He was a tall, lithe man, naked to the waist, from whence depended a brilliant blue garment that reached to his knees; long necklaces of black and white beads were around his neck, coils of brass like the fetters of a prisoner adorned ankles and wrists, whilst the lobes of his ears were weighed down until they touched his shoulders with ornaments of brass, ivory, and, most valuable of all, some empty cartridge cases. A belt stuck full of knives, blow-pipes, daggers, and the like, completed the equipment of the warrior, who stood motionless gazing at Dewa.

But she had forgotten her terror, and springing forward, was greeting him with quite extravagant manifestations of delight.

"It is Mahadra, the brave one, who honoureth this abode! Would that my lord were here to give thee greeting, and bid thee speed in thy journeying," she said in the coaxing, cooing accents only used when conquest was to the fore.

"It is my head the Rajah seeks, and all the welcome he would bestow would begin with a sumpitan and end in my heart," rejoined Mahadra fiercely; whereat Dewa trembled and shivered, though her lips were distorted in a pitiful attempt at a smile.

"Then why art thou here, husband of my sister, and henceforth my father's son?" she asked, laying emphasis on the relationship, in the hope that it might soften the heart of the warrior towards her.

"Indra is lazy, and sullen, and cold; Dewa, why did not my gold purchase thee?" he asked.

"I am not for sale; behold for thyself the state to which I have come," and she pointed to her tattooing with the gratified pride of a child.

But the spectacle apparently afforded him anything but pleasure, for he clenched his fist and hit out viciously at the empty air, as though striking an invisible foe; then he asked in a would-be careless tone: "Thine husband, the Rajah, say Dewa, where is he this day, that he resteth not at home from the heat of the sun?"

"He hunteth in the forest with his men, to return when night falleth," she replied.

Mahadra clapped his hand to his side with a deep groan of pain, and after a few sighs, gasps, and groans, sank at Dewa's feet apparently unconscious.

With a cry of terror, she bent over him doing what she could to restore him, but finding all her efforts unavailing, rushed away presently in search of assistance, running from house to house in the village to find aid. But not a creature was to be seen, the women being away in the fields, and the children, with a few decrepit old dames, down by the river.

Finding no one at hand to help her, and feeling afraid lest Mahadra would die if she left him to go further afield in search of aid, Dewa seized a gourd of water outside one of the houses and ran back to the sufferer, whom she had left lying on the floor of the room.

But her surprise and amazement knew no bounds when she reached it to find that he had disappeared. He could not have come from the house by the same way that she had run for help, or she must have seen him, not having been out of sight of the entrance all the time. Greatly mystified she searched the house, looking in all the rooms that opened on the platform or verandah stretching along the side of the building, and even going across the jambattan to the rice store or granary, to see if he had hidden himself there.

But nowhere could she find a trace of her late visitor, and desisting at length from her unavailing search, hot, weary, and cross, she sat down on her pile of mats and burst into tears of anger and vexation.

Secretly she had been very fond of him who was now her sister's husband, and might even have more stoutly resented her father's determination to sell Indra to Mahadra instead of herself, but for her ambition to be Radenajo of Limbau, to which state she had since that time attained. And now, if she told her women and Song of the Poonan chief's visit, they would gibe at her, that she had not raised an alarm, and caused the arch-rebel to be taken prisoner, so that his head might pay the penalty of his former crimes against society. Or they might even go further, and whisper to the Rajah that she had connived at the escape of the enemy against whom he had set himself in battle array. And though her lord was patient and forbearing with her in most things, giving way to her many whims and treating her as a spoiled child, even his patience would give out under a strain like this, and she might find herself plunged into the river with a stone tied about her neck to keep her down.

On mature reflection she decided to say nothing about the matter, arguing that there was no need for it since the man had gone leaving no trace behind him. She was quite feverishly gay that evening, and kinder than usual to her step-daughter, when the weary women returned from their toil in the fields. But she was uneasy behind her mirth, starting at every unaccustomed sound, and continually glancing around, as though looking and watching for some one who did not come.

The hunters returned at sunset, laden with the spoils of the chase, and ready to do full justice to the piles of bananas and big bowls of rice the women had cooked ready for their consumption. There was fish from the river too, cooked with sago into a kind of stew, and other local dainties, many of which only a native would be likely to appreciate.

The tired women waited on the men, eating their own portion as opportunity offered, while they ran hither and thither attending to the wants of the hunters. Even Dewa put on a semblance of industry now, moving about among the women, calling out numberless orders in a high shrill voice, which no one, however, paid much heed to, and herself serving the Rajah with the special dishes prepared for his delectation.

And when the meal was over, men and women were alike glad to lay weary frames down on mats spread over the floor, and sink into the dreamless slumber of those who have toiled for long in the open air.

But in the middle of the night, at its darkest, deadliest moments, a shadowy form slunk into the Rajah's sleeping chamber, and halted for a moment beside the mat on which he lay, then glided out again, carrying something in its hand.

In the faint cold light of early dawn, Dewa stirred and awoke, with a sensation of disaster upon her that chilled her like the rising mist of the river. And starting up on her elbow, she saw lying within reach of her outstretched hand the headless corpse of her husband.

For one moment her heart almost ceased to beat, and the surging in her ears was like the roaring of waters over the river cataracts at flood time.

Then shriek after shriek, piercing and shrill, rent the quiet of the morning, whilst men, women, and children came running to the door of the chamber to learn the cause of the terror and fright.

Among the others was Song, wild of eye and with streaming hair, who when she saw what had happened flung herself on the ground beside her murdered father in an agony of grief and despair; while a babble of excited questioning arose all around, and Dewa kept on screaming.

But she alone knew most surely whose hand had done the deed that made her a widow; and closer than ever she hid in her heart the fact of the coming and disappearance of Mahadra.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHOW SEN.

THE Rajah was buried with great pomp and ceremony in the burying place of his forefathers; and the Paw came up from Brunei to take possession of the dignities and wealth of his deceased kinsman.

Song was her father's only child, but in consequence of the unfortunate accident of her sex, she was passed over in the succession, the Paw being preferred before her. Doubtless had Ramalendo lived, he might have fought out the question by force of arms. But he was dead, and there was no one to fight on behalf of the Rajah's daughter.

The Paw intended to do great things now he had the privilege and state of the Rajah: but to do great things one must have wealth, and he was comparatively poor, despite the fact that his kinsman's revenues had descended to him. If only he could have secured the diamond for which he had searched so long, then his course would have been clear enough; as it was, he was considerably at a loss to know how to raise money for the carrying out of his plans. One of his ideas was to keep a retinue of armed men at Limbau; a very good arrangement it would be too, considering the proximity of his fierce son-in-law, Mahadra the Poonan. But armed retainers require food and payment, and though the wives of the soldiers would be useful in tilling the fields, and even in trapping game, the new Rajah did not clearly see his way to providing for his army, after he had raised it.

Casting about in his dilemma for some means of procuring supplies, he suddenly remembered his predecessor's daughter,

and instantly resolved to sell poor Song for what she would fetch.

Meanwhile Song was released from the heavy drudgery of labour in the fields, and ordered to make herself fair to look upon, though the poor girl was so worn out with toil and grieving as to take but a languid interest in the task of personal adornment imposed upon her. Naturally enough this order of the new master's evoked much curiosity and comment from the women of the household, who buzzed round Song like flies about a honey pot. The more kindly among them bade her smile and be cheerful, and to forget the father she had lost in the husband that she was to gain; whilst those spitefully disposed, said that doubtless the husband would beat her when he discovered that she had been tattooed for another.

A suggestion was made to the Rajah that failing the advantageous disposal of her to some of his own people, he should marry her to a Chinaman, and although of himself he could not have thought of such a proceeding, yet when it was suggested it seemed to him to offer some advantages.

A Chinaman might be induced to pay more for Song than one of the Rajah's own men could afford, and he would have the additional advantage of getting Song clear away from Limbau, where she might, if married to a spirited man, develop into a formidable rival.

The Rajah was turning these matters over in his mind, when he was sent for to attend a council sitting at a village six leagues to the southward, to determine some question of forest rights. Taking with him twelve of his ablest men as a guard of honour, he set forth in great state, dropping down the river in his own boat for the first half of the journey, and tramping the rest of the distance, through the lush under-growth of the forest, to the place of rendezvous.

Every man of the twelve was armed with blow-pipe and spear, but the Rajah had no weapon, save the kriss in his belt, although of every other description of finery he had enough and to spare.

The council met and feasted, as is the custom of councils in more civilised climes, and then debated in solemn state, until the vexed question that had called them together received a satisfactory settlement; after which their communications took a lighter trend, and veered round to a domestic character, the Rajah of Limbau even inviting offers for the hand of Song.

"Is it the half-moon girl you mean, brother of Limbau?" demanded a swart-complexioned man, afflicted with a hump on one shoulder, which did not tend towards making him more attractive in appearance.

"It is the same," answered the Rajah, who was about to call down curses on the head of the man who had slain Ramalendo, when he remembered just in time that it was by the hand of Mahadra that Ramalendo had fallen. He therefore forebore the cursing, and instead lauded the charms of the orphan Song, extolling her industry, her beauty, and her high degree with great earnestness.

"She hath the cunning hand with skins, 'tis said," put in another, a Chinaman, with the yellow skin and long pig-tail of his race.

"That is so," returned the Rajah with a gesture of admiration. "Such skill hath the maiden that in death the animals look more natural than when alive. A monkey set up by her hands hath as much of life as though warm blood still coursed through its veins."

"Her price, man of Limbau?" demanded the Chinaman, with his little eyes rolling avariciously. He had come to Borneo to get rich, and in the Rajah's description of Song he thought he saw a way of accomplishing the desired result with a great lessening of labour to himself.

The Rajah hesitated. To ask too much might be to spoil his chance of a bargain altogether, whilst to ask less than the Chinaman expected to pay would be a maddening loss of good money.

"It is not often that the daughter of a ruler is given into

the hand of a stranger, yet doubtless it might be done to one who could afford to pay," said he of Limbau, with a pompous intonation and much swagger of manner.

"A Dyak may be picked up for her weight in honey or wax, a Kadyan fetcheth but little more, and a Murut is less valuable than either," retorted the Celestial briefly; and from his manner the Rajah gathered that the bargaining would be very close, and no great price could be hoped for.

It was close, and some hours were spent in discussion before it was finally agreed that Chow Sen, the prospective bridegroom, should give in exchange for his wife half a score bags of sago, fifty nipa hats, and a sampang, with paddles cut from the iron-wood tree.

This was a much larger outlay than Chow Sen approved of; but a Rajah's daughter who could skin animals and dress the skins was not met with every day, and the Chinaman had a neat little plan in that astute head of his for going into the skin trade and making his wife do the work. Alligators and crocodiles abounded in the river by which he made his home, and the skins of those creatures always fetched money, if only properly preserved. Song would be worth to him more than the sago, the hats, and the sampang, and therefore he at length signified his willingness to take her at the Rajah's own price.

A happy man was the potentate of Limbau when he turned his face towards home once more, his retinue bearing the hats and the sago in bundles on their backs, whil'st half a score of indigent Chinamen toiled along under the burden of the sampang, which was a fair-sized river-boat, fastened together with wooden pegs and furnished with paddles of iron-wood.

Chow Sen accompanied him to bring back his bride, embarking, when the river was reached, in the same boat with the Rajah, some of the retinue being told off to paddle the sampang up to Limbau, whilst the ten perspiring Chinamen returned to the village where the council had been held.

At Limbau dire confusion reigned. In the absence of the Rajah, Mahadra had descended on the village, carrying off not only Dewa, but six or seven maidens of humbler degree, and that without so much as paying a bunch of bananas for the lot, or even saying by your leave.

This news was a keen humiliation for the Rajah, and enraged him almost to the verge of insanity, for Chow Sen stood by to hear it all, and drew his yellow face into the mocking semblance of a smile, whilst he listened to the calamitous tale of the Poonan raid.

A few fighting men had started in pursuit; the rest remained at home to guard the village and to warn other settlements of the warfare about to be waged against the Poonan, bidding the men to hold themselves in battle array against a sudden summons.

But although this was the wisest and only course that could have been pursued, the Rajah stormed at his men because they had not followed after and slain the thieving Poonan chief.

In the midst of the confusion and uproar which followed, Chow Sen was introduced to his bride, and handed over to the hospitality of the angry Rajah's two wives, who spread a feast in haste for his refreshment; outwardly civil since their lord had so commanded them to be, but tossing their gardenia-scented heads and muttering in corners on the degradation put upon them in bidding them serve a yellow-faced Chinaman.

Song herself regarded her future spouse with even keener disgust than that displayed by the Rajah's two wives. That she, a Rajah's daughter, should be sold to a Chinaman was more than her proud spirit could endure. And she rushed away from the presence of her purchaser to shed angry tears in private, and to fondle the little snake-skin bag containing the will that hung always round her neck. Ah, why could she not have married that good tuan Poyntz, instead of the hated Chinaman?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TENDER MERCIES OF CHOW SEN.

CHOW SEN had his home in a mangrove swamp, or, more properly speaking, on the ridge of firm ground that bounded the edge of the swamp. Here there was a deep pool or bay by the side of the river where the alligators came to feed, and where the Chinaman trapped them, baiting the traps with the flesh of their dead comrades. But the alligators were not discerning creatures, and so the nature of the flesh displayed to entice them bore no warning with it.

The house was a mere hut, made of rough planks and thatched with palm leaves, picturesque enough in a photograph, but not a pleasant place to live in, especially in wet weather; and a little garden was laid out behind, where vegetables were cultivated.

The business of trapping alligators was both difficult and dangerous. And so many narrow escapes had Chow Sen seen, that a dismal foreboding had crept over him lately lest he should one day fall a victim to his occupation.

So much impressed had he become with this fear, that he had hired a Chinaman to help him, taking care that the more dangerous part of the work fell on his subordinate. This man, Lun, had been left in charge whilst Chow Sen travelled to Limbau to bring home his bride; and he improved the opportunity by making a very complete inventory of all Chow Sen's goods and chattels, with the intention of appropriating these as chance offered.

But in this arrangement he had reckoned without Chow Sen, as subsequent events abundantly proved.

The house on the mangrove swamp was three or four leagues from the village where the council had been held, and lay on the side furthest from the territory of Limbau. A good two days' journey it was, for you cannot rush across the forest at express speed, but must wade through morasses, or creep through a tangle of ferns and rhododendrons, where every step of the way must be cut with a hatchet.

The Rajah's men had paddled Chow Sen and Song down the river to where the forest track to the village—which, by way, was called Ikkatra—opened up from the river bank.

The remaining distance had to be performed on foot, Chow Sen marching in solemn state on before, whilst Song followed him, laden with bundles containing her wardrobe and ornaments. If she were weary with the load she had to bear, she did not say so, but beguiled the tedium of the way by distorting her face with hideous grimaces for the benefit of her husband's back. When this amusement palled upon her, she would catch her breath in a choking sob, and fondling the little bag at her neck murmur the name of her beloved tuan Poyntz, whom she worshipped now that he was dead as a sort of deity, having a hazy, unformed belief that he was a kind guardian angel, who though unseen hovered near her, and would help her to be revenged on Chow Sen, who had already beaten her thrice.

At Ikkatra they slept for the night in the house of a brother Chinaman, at least Chow Sen did, but Song preferred to take her rest with the Chinaman's children, who slept on a raft loaded with rattan, which was moored to the village quay. Ikkatra had its name from the rattan, which grew in abundance all around, and there were eight or nine of these rafts already loaded on the river, prepared for starting in a few days for Brunei, where they would be sold. These rattans, bound into bundles of two score or thereabouts, each bundle called an ikkat, were piled high on the rafts like the walls of a house, the spaces left between these walls being roofed over to form tiny chambers, in which a family might

live on the voyage down river. The Chinaman's children slept there at night for the fun of the thing, and to guard the cargo from wandering marauders, their father having a large stake in that particular load and not being willing that it should come to grief.

With daylight next morning Song parted with the children, and lading herself like a beast of burden set out on the last stage of the journey to her new home. Her load was heavier now, Chow Sen having made extensive purchases and given them to his wife to carry ; and so toilsome was the road that she had no spirit left for grimaces even, as she crept along the tangled way under the fierce heat of the sun, staggering sometimes, falling once, but only to be beaten like a dog for her clumsy stupidity.

But tired and exhausted as she was, the first sight of the house on the swamp so frightened her with its dreary ugliness that she would have turned and fled back to Ikkatra had she dared. The stick of Chow Sen was too near, however, and laden as she was, escape just then seemed out of question. She would wait until she was rested, and then it might be some chance would offer of getting away from this dreadful abode.

The same possibility had presented itself to the mind of the amiable Chow Sen, and with a view to guarding against it he kept her pretty closely watched ; declaring if any such attempt were made he would lame her, so that she could not run, scarcely even walk for ever after.

With this outlook to deter her, Song let the days slip by and the moons wax and wane without endeavouring to cast off her hateful and cruel bondage : but she was only waiting, the smouldering fire of her hate for her oppressor growing stronger with every fresh instance of his brutality.

Chow Sen had no reason to repent of his bargain so far as work went, for Song's hands were quick and deft, and her industry above reproach. She taught the Chinaman new methods of softening and dressing the skins which she had

learned from the English naturalist, and rated the subordinate Lun for gashing and cutting at the thick hides when skinning the alligators caught in the traps, declaring that they would be worth half as much again if only they were not so hacked about.

But Lun had a constitutional aversion to work; indeed, he had been branded with a woman's name because of his laziness, and his leisure time was mostly spent in making plans for avoiding exertion. His brain was slow in its movements, and new ideas were not numerous with him, but one day his lethargic pondering produced a result that was amazing even to himself. He would compass the death of his master, and seizing on Song and the stock-in-trade, live at ease for the remainder of his days, finally finding a resting place in his native land.

So elated was he with this thought, that it was some time before he remembered to work out in his mind the details of the tragedy; this took more thinking about than he had supposed, giving him a bad attack of brain fag which lasted for a full week, rendering him more than ever disinclined for exertion.

In the end, the opportunity presented itself for the fulfilling of his desires without any planning on his part. The alligators were trapped by the simple process of throwing a barrier across the mouth of the pool, a sort of gate made of rattan and bamboo: when this was shut, the alligators imprisoned in the pool were killed by shooting barbed arrows into their eyes, each arrow carrying a string, so that in the event of the victim sinking its whereabouts could be discovered by means of the string.

When the alligators in the river became wild and frightened by this sort of treatment, the gate would not be used for a few days and they would come to eat the bait, going away undisturbed. It was after a pause like this in active operations that one day Chow Sen ordered the gate to be brought into requisition again, the pool being crowded with

alligators, fighting and struggling to get at the meat placed in tempting readiness for their delectation. With a very bad grace, Lun went through the slimy black mud of the edge of the swamp to the mouth of the pool, climbing out on the mangrove roots to reach the barrier, hoping to get it down in place before the prey should scent mischief.

Chow Sen had followed, and was watching, giving a word of instruction now and then, but in a low voice, being anxious not to disturb the creatures, which were feeding voraciously higher up the pool.

But somehow an inkling of danger reached them, and before Lun, who was slow and awkward in his movements, could get the barrier down they headed for the narrow outlet in a mad rush that boded ill for the Chinaman, perched in tottering unsteadiness among the twisted roots of the mangroves.

He saw his danger, and screamed in frenzied anguish to his master to help him, and Chow Sen darted forward, not with any desire of rescuing his helper, but because he thought that by a dexterous movement he might get the gate closed before many of the alligators had time to escape.

Then seeing the other's intention, Lun had a sudden idea, and leaning forward just as Chow Sen's hand rested on the gate gave him a mighty push that sent him almost into the open mouth of the first alligator—almost, but not quite. And Lun's opportunity had come, and gone for ever.

With a snarl of rage, such as a fierce animal gives as it springs upon its prey, Chow Sen saved himself by catching at the post supporting the gate, and seizing Lun with the full strength of his muscular arm, he threw the kicking, writhing wretch down in the path of the on-coming alligators.

Yell after yell broke up the quiet and woke the echoes of the forest wilds; then silence dropped on the woods again, save for the splashing made by the alligators as they sought the safety of the open river.

Song, hard at work among the skins on the sunny side

of the hut, heard the cries and was frightened by them. But she did not run to see what was the matter, having by this time learned the unwisdom of interference in what was very clearly not her business.

Presently Chow Sen appeared coming up from the swamp with a hurry and agitation about him that were very unusual. He walked with a limp too, as though he had hurt his foot, and Song ventured an inquiry in that direction.

But the answer she received was not of the sort to make her venture any more questions just then, for lifting the paddle which he always carried as a walking stick to help him over the swamp, he struck her savagely once, twice, thrice, on her shoulders, which were covered only by a cotton sarong.

Song went on with her work as though no blows had fallen on her. But the smouldering hate of her heart leaped into a fierce blaze of passionate resentment, and she determined to leave no opportunity untried of getting out of reach of her oppressor.

Two days later Chow Sen came in from his garden in great wrath and vexation; some orang-outangs had trespassed there, pulling up potatoes, trampling the melon patch, and doing more mischief in one night than months would serve to repair. It was not often they ventured so far into civilised places, but perhaps they hardly looked upon the Chinaman's hut as being included under that heading.

Southwards from the swamp by the alligator pool stretched miles upon miles of natural orchards, where flourished the luscious durian, the mangosteen, banana, and many other delicious products of the wilderness, and in this land of plenty the orang-outang made its home, eating the fruits as they came in season, and building its rude platform of sticks high up in the lofty trees.

"They will come again to-night, and then—and then they will not go away again," hissed the Chinaman, stamping about in his impotent raging, and hitting poor Song with the paddle that was rarely far from his hand.

"You have no trap," she ventured, dodging the uplifted paddle with such dexterity that it came down with a bang on the floor and split in two.

"I will make one, and if you do not mind it will catch you," he said with a fiendish chuckle, as, throwing the pieces of the paddle at her, he stalked out into the garden, where he worked for the remainder of the day at devising pitfalls for his enemies.

The next morning, to his unbounded delight, Chow Sen found a large male ape struggling in the trap, and filling the air with pitiful human cries of "Hoi, hoi, ough, ough!" like a boy who is having his tooth pulled out. Rushing out to his spoiled and trampled garden, he killed the poor creature, and called on Song to come and skin it.

"But see that the hide comes off entire," said Chow Sen, stalking round the dead ape, and measuring carefully its length and girth. "Then when it is dried and softened I will encase myself in the skin, and creep out to the fruit forest with my sumpitan, dealing death, death, death, to those beasts which have spoiled my garden."

Song shivered and stood irresolute. "I am afraid, it looks so like a man!" she exclaimed, as the ugly face lay up-turned to the sky, and the long arms were outstretched on the ground.

Chow Sen lifted his hand with a menace, but as there was no weapon in it she was not much impressed. "Get thee to the work, jade of Limbau, or by the bones of Confucius thou shalt go to feed the alligators ere ever the sun dips over the edge of the tappan trees, a dainty morsel truly, and the river fishes are hungry this day."

Song made no further protest, but controlling her inward shrinking as best she might, approached the long, hairy form, and dexterously slitting the skin up the middle, left it so cut that it might be made to fasten like a jacket. All the morning she toiled at the work, taking infinite pains with every part, whilst Chow Sen watched her, not venturing to interfere,

because in work like this her hands were so much more skilful than his own.

By noon the skin was off, and Song, carrying it in triumph to the place where she prepared her other skins, set to work at the rubbing, softening processes, which she had learned from her deceased friend and benefactor, Arthur Poyntz. Oh, she would dress this skin well, never fear! For in it she had resolved to make her escape, if only she could succeed in outwitting the crafty Chow Sen.

"How soon can you have it ready for me?" inquired that worthy, at sunset that night.

"It will take three days, my lord, and to have it ready so soon I must work night and day almost," she rejoined meekly.

"Work, then, and rest not; if the hide is not ready thy flesh shall feed the fishes," he snarled, angry that it should take so long, yet powerless in his ignorance to assert that it might be done sooner.

"But the other skins, my lord—those already in course of preparation—they will be spoiled, and much wealth lost, if left to neglect now," she suggested, appealing to Chow Sen's avarice, in order to make him work himself.

"What do they need?" he asked, foreseeing labour for his own hands, or the delaying of his meditated revenge.

"They must be rubbed and pounded like this," she replied, lifting a big piece of alligator skin down from the peg, where it was hung out of reach of the abounding and voracious rats: and she commenced rubbing and kneading at it, making her hands fly to and fro, until Chow Sen grew almost giddy with looking at her.

"Couldn't they wait, or couldn't you work at them between whiles?" he asked; but she only shook her head, declaring that even if it were possible for her to work night and day for three days and nights without a single pause, she could not prevent some of them being spoiled; the stock just then in course of preparation being unusually large, and she having lost the help of Lun.

Seeing no escape, Chow Sen growled his intention of assisting, and Song took care he should not lack employment during the hours that followed. When the moon went down she lighted flaring dammar torches, which flickered wildly in the soft night air, casting weird shadows on the black swamp and twisted roots of the mangroves, until the valorous Chow Sen was frightened to lift his eyes from the skins upon which he was toiling, lest by chance he should see the spirit of the murdered Lun beckoning to him out of the black night.

No fears of this description hovered round Song, however, as she worked and thought and planned during the hours before dawn. The skin of the orang-outang would be ready by sunset, she knew, the three days she had spoken of being merely a fiction with which to delude the perspiring tyrant who was labouring hard at the task she had set him. And if only her strength held out, she intended to escape disguised in the skin when the night should be at its darkest.

When morning came, she persuaded Chow Sen that it was necessary for them to snatch a few hours of repose, in order to be able to work again through the coming night. To this he assented, and thankfully welcomed the temporary respite from the rubbing and pounding.

Refreshed by a spell of sound slumber, Song was at work again by noon, and had remorselessly roused Chow Sen from sleep also. She had the mastery for a few hours by reason of her superior knowledge, and meant to use it to the utmost; and though he resisted at first, declaring that the skins might all perish for what he cared, she succeeded in working on his fears, and getting him at length to his toil again.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHINAMAN OUTWITTED.

WHEN sunset came Chow Sen vowed he would work no more until the morning, but ordering Song to be diligent through the hours of darkness, he retired to his hut to enjoy his nightly modicum of opium.

It was raining now, not in a pouring shower, but with a gentle pattering on the leaves, refreshing indeed, after the torrid heat of the day; and the scents of forest flowers were borne across the black reaches of the mangrove swamp, wafting hope and cheer to the weary toiler as she bent with trembling fingers over the completion of her task. By an hour after sunset her skin armour was ready to be donned, and with stealthy feet Song crept to the door of the hut to make sure that Chow Sen was comfortably under the influence of the narcotic, and not likely to make a sudden swoop on her as she made ready for flight.

He was lying on a pile of mats in the corner, heavily insensible now, having increased his allowance of opium to cover the extra fatigue; truly to-night the fates were proving propitious for poor little Song, and she crept away again, fearful lest that spell of unconsciousness should be broken before she could get clear off.

The orang-outang being several sizes larger than she was, its skin accommodated her and the few thin garments she wore without much squeezing. One or two treasures of finery, feminine gauds dear to the heart of a woman, had to be left behind in the hut, Song sighing over their loss, yet not daring to creep over the threshold to claim them. The

document given into her care by the tuan Poyntz still hung suspended from her neck in its snake's-skin bag, and her idea in escaping was to make the best of her way to Brunei, and there get the gold-worker's wife to tell her how she might reach the far away land to which the tuan had ordered the specimens to be sent. Once in England, she thought in her simplicity, all her troubles would be over, and every person she met would be as kind and good as her former benefactor.

But Brunei, the first goal of her journeying, was many leagues away over mountain and morass ; she might perish by the way, yet the thought did not deter her. Better to die alone in the wild forest than stay to have the life beaten out of her by the hateful Chow Sen.

The skin fitted her well. She had taken care of that, and fastened neatly down the front, the hideous face covering her own like a mask, through the empty eye-holes of which she could look out on the quiet night.

Before she glided away into the forest reaches, however, she must do something to throw her tyrant off the scent, and gathering up an armful of alligator skins on which Chow Sen had toiled so laboriously through the previous night, she carried them to the edge of the pool where she was wont to wash her skins when preparing them. Then taking the stained and greasy cloth which served her as an apron, she hung it on a protruding mangrove root, as though it had accidentally caught there, when she herself had been dragged down by a hungry alligator.

Clapping her hands softly in childish glee at the cleverness of her ruse to prevent pursuit, she shambled away into the darkness, a defenceless creature on God's earth, but joying in her freedom like some poor bird that, having broken the bars of its cage, beats the air with free wing once more.

It took longer than she expected to get clear of the mangrove swamp, which extended for miles around Chow Sen's abode, and by the time she reached solid, unwavering ground, where the tall trees met in sombre gloom above her head, her

remnant of strength was exhausted, and she could only sink to the ground and there lie until daylight came again to guide her on her way.

It was raining still, but encased as she was in the skin of the man-ape, no dampness troubled her, and pillowng her head on a hillock of leaves she sank into slumber.

A great chattering and commotion all around her startled her after a time, and she sprang up in dismay, half expecting to feel the paddle of Chow Sen descending on her back. But great was her astonishment to find that all the fuss and demonstration arose from a crowd of black monkeys which, gathered in large numbers on the branches of the surrounding trees, were evidently engaged in an excited criticism of the strange creature asleep on the ground.

The grey light of dawn was struggling through the dense masses of the upper foliage, and in the indistinct light so given the black forms of the monkeys looked appalling as they gibbered and chattered, swinging from branch to branch, but rarely touching the ground.

But they were only monkeys, and, as soon as she was really awake, Song ceased to have any fear of them, despite the fact that, in point of numbers, they were about a hundred to one.

Swinging her arms about in the wild gesticulations that an orang-outang would display under the like disturbances, she had the satisfaction of seeing the whole tribe make off with shrill cries. Noticing that they kept together, and retreated steadily in one direction, she guessed that they were going in search of breakfast, and, being herself faint for want of food, she followed their lead, trusting to their more agile movements to provide her with the meal she so much needed.

Nor was she disappointed. She chased the noisy creatures for half-a-mile or more, the monkeys scampering along the branches, swinging themselves from tree to tree with wonderful swiftness, and Song making her way with more laborious slowness on the ground, having to wade sometimes through

mud and water reaching to her waist, or to clamber over gigantic heaps of fallen timber. Finding their pursuer lagging behind, the monkeys would wait for her to come up with them, and then go on again, squealing and grunting as though it was all great fun. Presently the character of the forest altered; instead of mighty tappan trees, interspersed with iron-wood and feathery palms, with wonderful orchids, and grotesque pitcher-plants, came thickets of trees not unlike the English elm, from which Song's delighted eyes saw big ripe durians hanging. And now the fun began; the monkeys seated high up in the trees gathered the fruit, throwing the spiked outer casing down to hit Song on the head, who jumped about, rubbing her outer poll with the great hairy hands, in which her own were almost lost, and keeping up a succession of bleating cries, such as an orang would make if hurt or exasperated. The monkeys, hugely delighted at this performance, now threw the durians down as they plucked them off the trees, and Song had to dodge the missiles in real earnest, for a durian, large as a child's head and encased in a strong spiked covering, is not the sort of thing to be lightly encountered, and withdrawing to a convenient spot, where a fallen tree gave her a partial protection, she cut open the fruit with her sharp slender skinning knife, and made a royal feast.

Oh, the happiness of that morning in the wild woods! The rain had ceased, the forest leaves sheltered her from the sun, and the monkeys were her play-fellows! True, they were mischievous ones, and she had to keep a sharp look-out against sticks, stones, cocoa-nuts, durians, and all and sundry things of a like nature with which the impish creatures delighted to pelt her.

All through that day, and for many succeeding ones, Song wandered through the forest, living on nuts and fruit like the monkeys, and sleeping on the ground.

During this time many dangers threatened her. She awoke one morning to find a huge python hanging from a

branch of a tree above her, and retreated with more haste than dignity, scrambling away on all fours. Another time she was wading through a small stream, too small and shallow to be dangerous, as she fondly believed, but she was only half-way across when the ugly nose of an alligator showed itself a few yards further down the river, and she had to swing herself up by the branch of an overhanging tree, and crawl along it to the opposite bank.

But the greatest danger of all those weeks of wandering came to her by the hand of man. She was resting one hot noon tide in a part of the forest that was very hilly and rocky, with open spaces among the trees, where the sun shone down with overpowering force; and was lazily watching a peculiar long-nosed ape, which was springing from branch to branch, carefully shielding its too prominent nose with one hand as though to prevent it getting any damage, when she was startled by hearing a human voice saying in her own tongue,

“ See, yonder is an orang-outang: be still, that I may get a shot at him.”

Wild with terror Song sprang up and sought safety in flight, her arms in their hairy encasement hanging down on either side of her.

She dared not look behind to see to whom the voice belonged, but fled away into a dense thicket of fern reaching high above her head, where she hoped to hide beyond the reach of pursuit.

Pausing after a time to see if there was any sound of footsteps behind her, she was not a little surprised to find a poisoned arrow sticking through the hairy hand of the skin she wore: for a moment she looked at it in amazed wonder, almost expecting to feel the torpor of death stealing over her lithe young limbs, and only remembering after another careful inspection of the place where the arrow was sticking, that her own hand, in the hurry of running, had slipped upwards in the arm-skin that was so much longer than her own.

She saw nothing further of the sportsman, but the

incident frightened her, awaking in her heart a great yearning to return to civilisation, to live with men and women once more, and to hear human voices that might answer to her own.

The rainy season was drawing nearer too; in another moon at the furthest, this pleasant play-time in the woods must come to an end. And, sorely perplexed, Song spent long hours of consideration anent the best means of getting to the far-away city, which had been her goal when she started from Chow Sen's hut in the mangrove swamp.

The monkeys came less often to play with her now. And sometimes she was hard put to it for nuts or fruit to make a meal. There were wild potatoes in profuse abundance in some places, which the wild pigs rooted up to eat, and of which when hard pressed Song also took her share. But raw potatoes are not exactly nice feeding to the palate that has been pampered with durian and papaw and the other delectable dainties of the forest, and she longed with sickening desire for the messes of boiled rice and river fish or the savoury roast pig that had been the staple articles of food in her father's household.

Day by day, though as yet she did not realise it, she was growing weaker, and her young frame, enfeebled by the toil and hardship that had been her lot since her father took his second wife, was slowly collapsing from the effects of the strain.

She thought and planned how she would travel to the big city and find shelter among her old friends, but day after day passed without her making any effort at starting; her will-power and brisk energy were deserting her, and she could only sit still and wish, where once she would have acted resolutely.

Then one day in scrambling over a rough heap of fallen trunks and branches she fell, twisting her ankle badly, and after that there was no more question of a journey in her mind—nothing but to stay where she was and wait until kind death should find her.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PROFESSOR'S FIND.

HESTER DAYRELL had been exceedingly wrathful to find that her cousin George was to accompany them to Brunei, and wasted much breath in satirical speeches for his benefit; which infliction George bore with the utmost good humour, apparently very little impressed, and not at all convinced by her eloquence.

He proved very useful too in making arrangements for their journey from Singapore to Brunei, and when that place was reached found a hotel for them to stay at, and performed the duties of a courier generally with satisfactory promptness.

By the time they had been two days on the island Hester was willing to take back every statement she had made previously regarding her distaste for his escort, and having so far humbled herself, went further, and declared that she and the Professor might have come to serious grief but for his intervention.

Professor Pringle had never been in Borneo before, and in his desire to assimilate all the knowledge the experience could bestow, came very near bringing them into awkward and dangerous notoriety on more occasions than one.

He showed a perfectly childish curiosity for going over all the houses to which he could gain admittance, prying into the domestic arrangements, peeping into the cooking utensils, and even fingering the wearing apparel of the inmates with a view to determining its costliness. His one idea seemed to be to regard every person he met as a rare and unique specimen, and to subject it to a careful and critical examination. In

vain Hester expostulated and George uttered good advice ; he was not to be deterred in his researches, declaring that the truest education was gained, not from books, but by careful observation.

A courteous follower of Islam extended hospitality to them one day soon after their arrival in Brunei. He had a house a mile or so out of the city, a huge roomy structure of bamboo and rattan, with many off-shoots and excrescences where the main building had been added to according to the fancy or the convenience of the proprietor. The grounds surrounding this abode were laid out with considerable regard for beauty, and abounded with the rarest ferns and loveliest orchids that the visitors had ever beheld.

In his anxiety to leave no curiosity unseen, Professor Pringle made a sad hole in his manners that day ; and but for the intervention of George, who gave the outraged proprietor to believe that he was a harmless sort of lunatic, he would doubtless have found himself inside a prison, with the probability of some worse fate to follow. He was being conducted with Hester and George over the house and grounds by the suave and intelligent owner ; Hester holding him in close surveillance to see that he committed no gross impropriety of peeping, when her attention was momentarily claimed by their host, who was pointing out to her a *rara avis* in the shape of an Argus pheasant, preening its gorgeous-hued feathers in the sun : this bird, usually so hard to tame, or to rear in captivity, was quite at home among the brilliant flowers of the garden, and, perched on the bough of a tree, furled and unfurled its splendid wings, as though calling on the strangers to admire their vivid colouring.

A minute or two Hester gazed at the beautiful creature, then turned for the Professor to admire it too, when lo, he had disappeared !

Nervously plucking George's sleeve she told him what was the matter, and then darted away in search of her charge. Up and down the scented alleys of the garden she hurried, in

and out of the mazy puzzles wherewith the Bornean delights to bewilder a stranger, but no Professor Pringle could she espy ; and was on the point of returning to George and their host when a wild chorus of shouts and cries attracted her attention, in the midst of which she detected the raised tones of the Professor.

But the noise was on the other side of the wall, and looking about for some means of reaching the scene of the disturbance, she saw a low door, and running to it had the great good fortune to find it unlocked.

This admitted her to another garden, as lovely in its way as the one she had left, but with a palpable difference about it that struck her directly. Glancing up at the windows which overlooked this portion of the grounds, she saw to her dismay that they were heavily barred. She was in the women's quarter then, but where, oh, where was the Professor ?

Guided by the clamour of tongues, waxing each moment more shrill and angry, she ran through more scented alleys, up steps and down steps, until, reaching a stone-paved court at the extreme end of the building and almost at the limits of the gardens as well, she descried the Professor in the custody of a lean-visaged man, who had him firmly grasped by both hands, whilst from a grated screen at the house-end of the court rose that Babel of angry-tongued women, whose noise had guided Hester to the spot.

The Professor was mildly expostulating at this grossly inhospitable treatment, and asserting in loud explanatory tones that he was only viewing the grounds, when Hester, rushing up to him with her face as white as her frock, besought him to come away at once, for he had intruded all unawares into sacred precincts, and was committing a grave sin against etiquette.

“ Oh dear, oh dear, I entirely forgot our friend's religious creed, and that he would in consequence keep his women secluded ; pray explain to those ladies if you can, my dear,

my regret for having given them cause for offence and alarm, and resolutely turning his back on the grating, behind which the shrill indignation was still proceeding, he began to walk away as fast as he could, the thin-faced man still keeping a tight grip on his arms.

Hester faced round on the partition, through which veiled forms could dimly be seen, and raising her voice slightly, said in her calm, resolute way: "Pray have no fear, ladies! The gentleman meant you no harm; he is only a professor so wise and learned that, absorbed in his knowledge, he forgets that there are such things as women in the world."

The shrill anger dropped to a listening silence whilst Hester was speaking, and though the scandalized fair doubtless understood no word of what she said, they were evidently mollified by the apology of tone and manner, and even chorused a distinct murmur of approval as Hester bowed and retreated. The individual who had Professor Pringle in custody was the head man of the household, who hurried him away to the master of the house with so much speed that Hester had some difficulty in catching them up.

Then followed another stormy scene, at the close of which the English visitors took a somewhat hurried and undignified leave, and departed to their hotel in no very enviable frame of mind, George, hotly indignant, breathing anathemas on "the stupidity of the Professor!" Hester, pale and troubled, with an uneasy apprehension lest they had not heard the last of her guardian's escapade; and the Professor himself gravely displeased to think his late host should have so greatly misjudged him, by imputing his desire for knowledge to a vulgar and impertinent curiosity.

Nothing more was heard of the unpleasant episode for two or three days, during which Hester and George were actively searching for some trace of Song, the *l*-lf-moon girl. It was not difficult to learn all there was to be told concerning the last days of Arthur Poyntz, the gold-worker and his wife being garrulous and good-natured; and in

talking of the dead tuan they were always praising Song's devotion to him and desire to do him service. But as to where she might be found now, they neither of them had the faintest idea.

"The Rajah is dead," said the gold-worker, looking up from his bench, where he had been engrossed with a piece of delicate filigree work prior to the advent of George and Hester when they went to make their call of inquiry.

"But the next man, the present Rajah, would not he be able to tell us?" asked George.

The gold-worker shook his head, at the same time laying aside his tools and the work on which he had previously been engaged: he was not the sort of man who could talk and work too, and just now it seemed necessary to talk. "Limbau is a strange place, and the people, they are but low-bred savages; witness this tale that I will tell you now," he said, spreading his hands with the mincing gestures of a Frenchman, although he spoke a broken English, learned from the lamented tuan Poyntz.

"Say on," said George encouragingly, whilst Hester, looking curiously about her, wondered how her Uncle Arthur could ever have endured to live and die in such a place, with its bare surroundings and dreary outlook.

"The Rajah, towards whom you are in search, had his head lifted, be it known," said the gold-worker with a portentous nod, and air of great mystery.

"Ah, by head-hunters, I suppose?" said George, with a glance of triumph at Hester, because his assertions regarding the barbarity of the natives were thus meeting confirmation.

"Yes, yes, by head-hunters; yet he was a good kind man, the Rajah who was the father of little Song. But death comes to all, and he fell. The next Rajah was he who had been Paw of Limbau, a cruel man, who spilled men's blood like water, when he was searching for the big Pontianak diamond, yet he found it not, despite his murdering of innocent

people ; but retribution comes to most sinners, and it came to him. Before he reigned two moons in Limbau his head was lifted also ; and now there rules in Limbau, Mahadra, who is chief of the Poonan also, and the cleverest head-hunter in all the land. People fight shy of those parts now, no man's head sitting safely on his shoulders who dwelleth within a day's journey of the territories of the Rajah ? "

" And Song, what of her, is she dead also ? " asked Hester gloomily, for in the face of stories like these, her quest seemed anything but a hopeful one.

" Lady, I know not. Often I say to myself, if Song yet lived, she would have sought a shelter here from the enemies of her people. But even that is not assured, since Mahadra may have taken her."

" Do you think that my Uncle Arthur, whom you call the tuan Poyntz, had married Song ? " Hester asked, screwing up her courage for the question.

" Who shall say ? " retorted the gold-worker shaking his head sagely. " The ways of men are devious and hard to learn. Had it seemed well to the tuan to make the child his wife, he had done it, asking counsel of none. Truly he loved her well, his last look being towards her ere he started on his journey to the No-night land."

Hester shivered, and then at the suggestion of her cousin went into the family rooms to talk to the gold-worker's wife, though she could learn nothing of real importance from the excited, talkative woman, who was so palpably impressed with the honour done to her by the visit of the pale-faced Western lady.

When Hester and George left, it was with the promise to repeat their visit on the following day. This, however, was rendered out of the question by the Professor receiving an official command to leave Brunei in twenty-four hours, or otherwise suffer imprisonment on charges of trespass in another man's domain.

The Professor was furious. To be hustled out of a foreign

city on a charge so absurd was intensely mortifying to his pride and self-respect: and Hester was more than thankful to have her cousin George at hand to help her in soothing the irate scholar, and preventing him from doing anything rash at this critical juncture.

Two courses were open to them: they could either return to Singapore or travel into the interior, the official decree only banishing them from the city itself. And after long and anxious consultation they decided to take the latter course, hiring native guides and escorts to conduct them to the fruit forests, where the large man-apes of which the Professor was in search chiefly abounded. It was drawing near to the period when the rainy season would begin, and no time must be lost if a specimen was to be secured before the annual downpour made travelling in the interior an impossibility.

Procuring the necessary attendants and all supplies needful for camping out, the trio shook the dust of the unfriendly city from their feet and set their faces towards the south-east in a straight line for Ikkatra.

The river journey was very pleasant, and the Professor, recovering somewhat from his anger and chagrin, began to take absorbing interest once more in that page in the book of Nature now outspread before him. With Hester for a companion he made short excursions into the forest at every point where the boat stopped for a few hours, leaving George on guard, to his great disgust. But their escort had already displayed such thievish propensities that it was highly necessary that some check should be placed on their depredations.

Reaching Ikkatra, they halted a few days to make inquiries about the district they intended to explore, and the probabilities of their finding what they sought. One or two men of their escort were discharged, and fresh ones, well acquainted with the surrounding forests, were engaged.

One of these men declared that a short time before, when hunting in the woods, he had stumbled upon a large orang-

outang, and would have secured it but for the haste with which the creature made off, not climbing the trees but running along the ground like a human being.

"Professor, that should surely be Lady Anstruther's missing link," said Hester with a laugh, whilst that careful scholar turned at once to his notes on the orang-outang to see if haply swift running was admissible with orang nature as he understood it.

"Why didn't you follow it up, if you were as close to it as you say?" asked George, who privately believed not a word of the story, so incredible did it appear to his common sense that an orang-outang should seek safety in flight along the ground, when trees were all around it.

"Worthy tuan, we had no time," returned the native with such manifest sincerity that even the sceptical George was forced to an unwilling belief in his statement. "We were hunting for pheasants and birds of gaudy plumage; these would find a market and bring us wealth, but the man-ape had not harmed us and we had no need of him, therefore when our first arrow failed to fell him we let him go and hunted only the game of which we were in search."

"Good friend, conduct us to the spot where this took place; you shall be well rewarded," said the Professor in great excitement, still fingering his notes with anxious care. "Hester, George, if this man's tale is true, depend upon it we have another distinct creature not classified among the *Simiadae* already known, perhaps belonging—who shall say?—to *Hominidae*, lower and degraded doubtless, but still—man!"

"In short—the missing link," put in Hester with a mischievous gurgle of laughter, in which the graceless George was only too ready to join.

Their merriment, however, was no deterrent to the working of the Professor's faith, and after another period of dreamy meditation on the habits and characteristics of the animal under discussion, he announced, with an air of triumph, "There can be no doubt that it is a different species from any

yet known, and if we can only procure a specimen of this particular kind I shall return to Europe famous!"

"We had better lose no time in starting on our search in that case, for it would surely be a pity to be so near to fame and yet to miss it after all," replied George, repressing his laughter, and maintaining a decorous gravity of face with great difficulty.

"And if we find it, this missing link, what a stir we will make in our sleepy old Stourbridge; the city shall be placarded from end to end with posters announcing the Professor's find," cried Hester, who as yet could not be induced to take the idea seriously.

Despite her hardness of belief, however, the next morning the little company set their faces towards that part of the forest spoken of by their guide as the habitat of the mysterious animal.

CHAPTER XVIL

THE MISSING LINK.

THE Professor sat at the door of his tent slowly fanning himself, for the heat of the afternoon had been very great, though it was lessening somewhat as the sun dropped slowly towards the horizon.

His face wore a pensive air, and his attitude altogether was that of a disappointed man. For more than a week had he been wandering in this part of the forest, yet never a glimpse had he had of an orang-outang, either of the familiar kind whose favourite mode of progression was to swing itself from branch to branch, or of that order which, according to the guide, ran swiftly along the ground like a man.

And hope was slowly dying in his heart—hope of the fame that comes from discovery, that is. He would find an ordinary orang-outang, doubtless, though he might have to journey farther into the interior in search of it. But of the extraordinary sort he already despaired, and had an uncomfortable consciousness on him, too, that he had been made the victim of the shrewd guide's too lively imagination.

It had been decided that they should strike their camp next morning and push straight on into the interior, and George and Hester were making a sort of final survey of the ground already explored before giving it up as a hopeless case. They had taken two of the men with them, whilst two more were catching fish for the evening meal in the little stream on the other side of the hill. The remaining man, a native of the Ikkatra, had been despatched to that place for provisions, and so for the nonce the Professor was alone.

As he sat dreamily gazing at the vistas of solemn forest, stretching away into infinite distance, his attention became caught and fixed on a moving object, so far away as to be too indistinct for identification. His first thought was that it might be the search party returning, but there was only one figure, and that was moving slowly and feebly, as though weakened by illness or some bodily hurt.

A little curiously, the Professor went into the tent behind him and brought from thence his field-glass, which, after focussing carefully, he turned upon the form that had attracted his attention. For one moment he stared through the glass, and then, uttering a yell of triumph, flung it unheeded on the ground, and seizing a big stick rushed in pursuit of that feeble, limping figure as fast as his legs could carry him.

It had disappeared from sight, yet he knew it must be there, for had he not seen it with his own eyes through the glass, a big orang-outang, that walked upright like a man! It seemed too weak to wander far, and he did not doubt but that he should be able to come up with it easily enough. The chief difficulty might be in effecting its capture single-handed, but he dared not risk the delay involved in summoning help. He therefore ran on, getting more and more out of breath every minute, and less able to cope with his hoped-for prey, yet never once feeling his valorous heart quake or grow faint at prospect of an encounter so close at hand.

Ah, there it was, creeping with slow, painful steps down the slope in front of him, and, wonder of wonders, marvel of marvels, it carried a stout staff in its hairy paw to help along its lagging, limping gait!

Professor Pringle composed nearly a whole chapter of his intended book on the "Evolution of Species," as he raced down the hill in pursuit of this unique specimen, for great minds can compass a large amount of work in a very short space of time when pressure is put upon them.

But the orang-outang, finding that it was pursued, quickened its pace, breaking into a shambling, limping run, and the Professor—who by this time was completely winded—saw with dismay that his quarry seemed likely to escape him after all, when the creature, catching its clumsy foot in a trailing vine, fell full length upon the ground, where it lay motionless, not attempting to rise.

With a shout of triumph that woke the forest echoes far and near, the delighted Professor dashed forward, and at the very same moment George and Hester also appeared on the scene, in company with the two natives.

These all broke into a run, seeing that something unusual was to the fore, but the Professor was the first to reach the prostrate figure, beside which he flung himself down in a perfect ecstasy of triumph.

“It is, it is the missing link!” he shouted in a voice of jubilation to the advancing runners, laying eager hands on the motionless form; then he drew back suddenly, as though something had frightened him.

“What is it, Professor? Are you afraid it will bite?” shouted George, in a merry tone, holding out his hand to Hester that she might come the faster.

But the Professor was gazing at the object on the ground, not attempting to touch it, and with the expression of his face, from disappointment and surprise, becoming each moment more ludicrous.

“It is not an ape, but a human being,” he announced in solemn tones as the others drew near.

“Of course,” retorted Hester gaily, “what else could you expect, Professor, but the skin of an animal and the mind of a man?”

But he only held up his hand with a silencing gesture. “Hush, Hester, it is some poor soul in a bad plight, I am afraid; come and help me.”

She stooped over the queer figure then, but a little timidly, by no means assured that this unclassified creature might not

fly up and do her some damage even now. But a minute later she and George were eagerly plucking at the skin-armour to get it unfastened, that the prisoner inside might have freer air to aid it in recovering from its swoon.

"It is a girl!" exclaimed Hester in amazement, as the hideous mask of the orang-outang was folded back, and poor little Song's delicately-formed face, wan and shrunken now, stood revealed.

"And she has fainted," said George, with a truly masculine helplessness.

"Bring some water, George," commanded his cousin sharply, pushing the skin further back from the unconscious girl's head, revealing her coils of sleek black hair, tangled and uncared for now, but coiled about the small head in a profusion that many a belle might envy.

One of the natives had a gourd containing water slung over his back, and he brought it to Hester, who wetted her handkerchief and dabbed gently at the girl's face, until her eyelids moved, stirred, and finally unclosed, revealing two lustrous black eyes that looked wonderingly up into the faces bent above her.

"Are you better, poor child?" asked Hester compassionately. She was fanning the unknown with her hat, and spoke in her own tongue, forgetting that probably the stranger would not understand her.

But those words of English fell on Song's ears like balm. "It is the voice of the tuan who died," she replied faintly.

"Why, she speaks English! Good gracious, what next, I wonder?" And George Poyntz got up with a jerk and moved further away, as though afraid of a creature so uncanny.

But Hester waved him off impatiently. "Be quiet, George; you frighten her. Who are you, dear, and how did you come to be wandering alone in the forest like this?" she asked slowly, making each word very distinct in order that the stranger might understand.

But Song was gazing fearfully at the faces of the two natives, who from curiosity had drawn near, and instead of replying to the question, looked anxiously into Hester's face, and asked, "Where is Chow Sen?"

Hester in her turn, surprised at the query, looked up at the Professor. "Is her mind wandering, do you think?" she said in a low tone.

"Probably; she seems very weak. But we had better carry her back to our camping place; we shall be able to care for her better there," returned Professor Pringle gravely.

"The tuan Poyntz is dead," murmured Song vaguely, as George and the two natives hastily improvised a litter to carry her the short distance to their encampment.

Hester started. The other's tone had been so low, that no one saving herself had heard the words. "Whom do you mean?" she asked, bending lower over the prostrate form.

"He who was so kind. But he is dead, and now there is no one," replied Song so faintly that Hester had difficulty in catching the words.

But a wild, improbable impulse came to her as she listened to the halting speech, and though she put it away from her it returned again and again, as she tramped by the side of the litter, back to the tents.

The other men had returned, and were busily employed in preparing supper, the appetising odour of frying fish being borne to them on the still air as they approached the camping place.

"Fish!" exclaimed the stranger with a sudden brightening of her lustrous eyes, and looking at Hester.

"Yes, fish; do you like it?"

Song nodded expressively, and then lay still and quiet until the tents were reached.

The men put the litter down before the opening to Hester's tent, and then she and the Professor supported the poor waif inside, that she might have the ungainly cumbersome skin stripped from her trembling limbs. Then the

Professor came out, and lounged beside George in the warm light of the sun-setting. Neither spoke, though the thoughts of both were busy about the same subject, and the manner in which they had been duped by this strange girl, who had elected to roam the forest clad in the skin of an orang-outang. The men were laying the supper out, and George was wondering when Hester was going to appear again, when she darted suddenly out of the tent, and came running towards them with a pale face and shining eyes, and an air of extreme excitement about her.

"Professor! George! it is—it is the half-moon girl," she cried, her voice trembling with excitement.

"A half-moon girl, you mean, I expect; they may be counted by scores in this country of tattooed women," George remarked in a tone of calm scepticism, it being a principle of his not to believe anything until it had been proved beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"No, no," said Hester, struggling with some emotion that appeared potent enough to break down her self-control. "It is *the* half-moon girl mentioned in Uncle Arthur's diary—Song, daughter of the dead Rajah of Limbau."

The Professor and George started up in profound astonishment, staring at Hester as though she had suddenly developed lunatic tendencies.

"Come," she said, turning back to the tent; "come and see her, but I fear she is very weak and ill, and almost starved as well."

"A most remarkable coincidence!" gasped the Professor, whose breath had been quite taken away by these tidings.

But George stalked after his cousin with a very pronounced frown on his good-looking face, and he was wondering why a sensible girl like Hester should be so pleased at finding the person who, of all others, might have it in her power to bring disaster and disappointment on the Poyntz family.

"Come," said Hester, holding up the flap of the tent for them to enter.

Song, denuded now of the hideous, cumbersome skin, looked very small and fragile as she lay on Hester's bed, covered with a rug, one arm only, with its circlet of half-moons tattooed in blue, lying on the coverlet.

She looked in frightened anxiety at the visitors, but would not speak until Hester urged her to tell to the two gentlemen what previously she had been saying of herself and her identity.

Thus urged, Song opened her lips, saying in fairly good English, "I am Song, daughter of the Rajah of Limbau, and the tuan Poyntz, who is dead, was my kind friend."

"But if, as you say, you are the Rajah's daughter, how is it that you are wandering poor and alone?" asked the Professor in his grave, kind manner, yet with much doubt and perplexity on his face.

"My father is dead, and the Paw, his successor, sold me to a Chinaman, who beat me, and would have killed me but that I ran away, choosing rather to die in the woods than be slain by his hand," she answered with a little defiant flash.

"Had you no friends with whom to take shelter?" asked the Professor pityingly.

Song shook her head. "The tuan Poyntz was dead. In life, he would have sheltered me: and beside him there was no one who would not have given me back to the power of Chow Sen, who was my husband. I meant to go to England, but I was tired and could not start."

"And why to England, poor child?" the Professor said as he drew closer to Song, and gently patted the hand lying on the coloured rug.

"The English people are kind, they would not beat me like Chow Sen; besides, I would give to them the document which the tuan left in my care, and they would say that I was good to have kept it so safely and well," she said simply.

"What document, Song?" It was Hester's voice that put the question, though so strained and shaken by emotion as to be almost unrecognizable.

"The paper that said what was to be done with his property when he was dead; the tuan Poyntz was rich?" Song's voice had a note of query in it now, and Hester nodded her head in confirmation.

But George turned hastily and left the tent, muttering incoherencies to himself that it would be rough on the poor old governor, and with unpleasantly vivid mental pictures of his mother's pale, sad face and crushed manner—pictures of how she might be expected to look if that will in Song's possession was carried to England, and Swarling Tower was found to be the property of some other person.

Supper was late that night, and somewhat over-cooked as well. The Professor made his meal in solemn silence, as though weighed down by ponderous meditation; George was sulky, and Hester appeared only by fits and starts, being too much taken up with their guest to have time for sitting down to eat with the others.

Song's unlooked-for advent completely upset their plans for the next day, Hester declaring that the poor girl was too weak and ill to be moved. As they could not in common humanity leave her alone, and as it did not seem right to leave Hester unguarded either, the Professor elected to remain in camp with two men, whilst George was to take the other three, and travelling south-east still, see if he could not manage to get sight of an orang-outang.

The hunting party went off in the middle of the night, when the moon rose, and Hester came out of her tent to say good-bye to her cousin before he started.

"You look so cross, George; what is the matter?" she asked in a tone of pretended indifference.

"I'm not cross, I am only disgusted that an ugly, yellow-skinned little wretch like that yonder should have the power of making so much mischief. Pity the Chinaman didn't do for her when he was about it," retorted George brutally, his hardness of heart arising from those aforesaid mental pictures of the old folks at home.

"For shame, George! How can you be so wicked?" cried Hester in an outraged tone, recoiling a little as she spoke.

"Innate cussedness, I reckon," he replied briefly, adding by way of a parting shot, "Go and take care of the charming Mrs. Chow Sen, Hester, and much joy may she bring you!"

But Hester went back to her post too angry for reply, and thinking in her heart that most men were callous and lacking in the finer feelings of humanity, but that George was harder and more callous than any man she had ever known; in short, he was horrid!

The dawning found the poor wanderer Song in high fever, whilst her injured foot was pronounced by the Professor to be in a very bad way indeed from the effects of neglect and over-strain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

POOR LITTLE SONG!

IT was three days later before the hunters returned, and then they came laden with the much-desired orang-outang and numerous birds of brilliant plumage.

They were tired and worn with their long tramp over uneven ground, for it was a far cry from the little camp to the groves where they had chanced upon the coveted specimen ; and the big ape, when they had secured him, proved a heavy weight to be carried, turn and turn about, across the leagues of forest, to the little cluster of tents where Song had found such opportune shelter in her extremity.

George had come back with the determination to beg his cousin's pardon and promise better behaviour in future, having spent much time during his days of absence in composing conciliatory speeches for Hester's benefit.

But these examples of effective eloquence were all forgotten when he neared the camp with his native companions, though he could see his cousin coming to meet him with the Professor at her side ; he was wondering what the two men, left behind to guard the camp, were digging such a deep hole for at the bottom of the slope ; and a vague, chill fear seized him and made him shiver, despite the intense heat of the afternoon and the perspiration in which he was bathed.

Hester's face was very pale and sad, and her eyes were red and swollen with much weeping ; whilst the Professor's countenance was enshrouded in gloom, which not even the sight of the burden carried by the men could alleviate.

"Song is dead," said Hester abruptly, and looking into her cousin's face with keen reproach, exactly as though he were to blame for the catastrophe.

"Hester, I am sorry for you," he said humbly.

"You need not be sorry for me, but for yourself, that you spoke with such needless cruelty of the poor ill-used child," she replied in a dignified manner, and then her pride giving way before the strain of her sorrow, she cried out in plaintive eagerness, "Come and see her, George; she died at sunrise."

It is possible that the young sailor would have preferred not to be confronted with death in so emotional a form just then; but Hester was imperious and must be obeyed, so he followed her into the tent where Song lay shrouded in white, her hands folded on her quiet breast, her face placid and still now, fixed in the immobility of death.

"Poor little soul!" exclaimed the young man involuntarily, as he stood looking down at the dead girl lying on Hester's bed. He could pity her in his heart, and even feel a sort of regret for the young life thus untimely ended; because she could bring no disaster on his own loved ones now; his mother's face need not grow overcast and sad, nor his father's mood of habitual melancholy turn into savage bitterness because of this half-moon girl, about whom his uncle had written with such evident affection.

"She died of fever, but the Professor says it was not infectious, only the result of starvation and the hardness of her life," said Hester, her voice breaking in choking sobs.

"And the will, where is it?" he asked, anxiety in his voice, although he tried hard to keep it coolly indifferent.

"I have it here in the bag in which Song kept it," said Hester, pointing to her throat. "Uncle Arthur had sealed it in an envelope, and the seals have not been broken."

To this George made no reply, and re-covering the face of the dead girl, Hester motioned him to leave the tent, following him herself a moment later.

The hunting party were urgently in need of food, and on

their account supper was served at once, but it was a hurried meal, and when it was over preparations were made for the funeral. By this time darkness had fallen, and the torches carried by the men, or tied to the branches of the trees, gave a weird fantastic air to the solemn scene.

The Rajah's daughter had no coffin, but was merely wrapped in sail-cloth, Hester dropping one last kind kiss on the pathetic face of the half-moon girl before the covering was finally adjusted over it. Then they carried her down the slope to the grave that had been dug at the bottom, and lowered her slowly into it; after which the Professor read the Burial Service in his most impressive manner, whilst Hester and George, with the five natives, made a strangely picturesque group, on which the flickering light of the torches quivered and danced.

When it was all over, and the grave had been filled in, Hester went away to her tent to be alone; and George, who was thoroughly tired out with the fatigue of his march across the forest, made haste to go to bed. But Professor Pringle sought neither solitude nor slumber, devoting himself instead to the skinning of the orang-outang, which had been brought into camp that evening.

In the morning George carved Song's name and social status on a mighty tappan tree, under which the grave was made, and Hester strewed the little mound with flowers and ferns, bedewing them with the tears of her keen regret.

Then the camp was broken up, and they turned their faces towards the coast again, leaving Song alone in the mighty forest, where the black monkeys, her friends and playfellows, would come to gambol about the branches of the trees near her grave, and the flowers would blossom and fade through the uneventful seasons as they passed.

But nothing would disturb the sleeper in her quiet bed; her brief day of life, with its toil and trouble, was ended, and upon her anxious, throbbing heart the eternal peace had fallen at last.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END OF SUSPENSE.

HARVEST and hop-picking were over, and Michaelmas, with its rural feasts and fairs was also past, when the elder George Poyntz, worn out with the alternating hope and fear, and the suspense of the last twelve months, fell ill with a low fever which brought him to the verge of the grave.

They were getting used to invalids at Swarling Tower by this time: first it had been Allie with her broken collar-bone, then Mrs. Poyntz, who indeed was very much of an invalid still, and finally, the master of the house. He was, according to Jane, a regular handful to manage when confined to his sick-room, but it is possible that the unrest arose more from trouble of mind than from bodily illness and suffering.

By the middle of October, letters were received from Hester and the Professor, announcing the finding and death of Song, the half-moon girl; and also telling of their own speedy return, bringing the will left by Arthur Poyntz with them. The news had the effect of so greatly increasing the sick man's fever that the keenest anxieties of those who watched by his bed were aroused lest he should not be alive to greet the travellers on their return.

Young George was coming with them, he having applied to his captain in Calcutta for leave of absence, which was immediately granted; and now his mother was counting the days to his arrival, praying silently that if her husband was to be taken from her, her eldest son might be by her side to help her bear the blow when it fell.

October was melancholy beyond belief that year, with weather which was extremely depressing. But the first of

November brought a change; the sun came out of its long retirement and shone cheerily down on the damp cold world; the nurse declared that the invalid showed a slight improvement; and when at mid-day a heated telegraph boy arrived from Stourbridge on a bicycle, with a wire from George saying that they had reached Plymouth and were coming on as fast as they could travel, Mrs. Poyntz felt her spirits revive, and a warm glow of something like coming happiness steal into her sad heart.

By night it was raining again, but the pattering of the drops against the windows did not sound so depressing now; and with the knowledge that their father was better the children ceased their quiet movements and subdued talking, raising a clatter and commotion in the place that was almost welcome after the brooding gloom of the past few weeks.

The next morning the sun shone out again, and Mrs. Poyntz ventured to draw up one of the blinds in her husband's room, that the brightness of the outside world might penetrate to his pillow.

"It seems good to see the sun again, Alice," he said, with a wistful look at the window.

"Yes, dear, I am glad it shines to-day," she answered softly, lifting his head and putting his pillows so that he could get a better view of the outside brightness.

"You will bring them up when they come, Alice, at once, mind," he said with a sort of impatient snarl that almost made her smile, it was so very like old Stephen's growl, at which in former days she had been used to shiver like a culprit.

"Yes, dear, directly they come, and I do not think that they will be long now," she replied, and even as she spoke there was a noise of wheels on the gravel, and looking out, she saw a cab turning the corner of the hop-oast with George sitting on the box by the side of the driver.

Downstairs she ran as fast as her trembling limbs could carry her, to be met at the hall door by George, who threw his arms round her, bidding her cheer up and never say die,

in an incoherent manner, meant to be consoling. Behind him came quite a crowd of familiar faces, or so it seemed to her bewildered gaze—Hester, the Professor, Mr. Holtum, and Mrs. Pringle, who, having been separated so long from her husband, was not disposed to let him out of her sight now.

“Will you please come up at once? Mr. Poyntz is so anxious, and I promised him there should be no delay,” she said apologetically, unwinding her son’s arms from her waist, and moving off towards the foot of the stairs.

“Certainly, my dear madam; we will get it over as quickly as possible,” Mr. Holtum answered urbanely, and thinking with some satisfaction, as he followed her, of his bill of costs.

Reaching her husband’s side, Mrs. Poyntz took his hand and faced round on her advancing guests, with a sort of defiant determination to resist the lot of them should need arise. George came to stand beside her, and Hester, with her guardian and his wife, formed into a little group at the foot of the bed, whilst the lawyer stood between, the arbiter of fate.

“The will, where is it?” asked the sick man hoarsely, his eyes glaring fiercely out from his thin, wasted face. He had not greeted the travellers; time enough for that when the worst was known!

Hester silently unfastened a bag from her neck and handed it to the lawyer, who, opening it, drew out a folded envelope, sealed with a big red seal, bearing the monogram of the dead naturalist.

“It is intact, you see,” remarked the lawyer, holding the envelope out to the man on the bed that he might satisfy himself with regard to its entirety.

“Yes, yes, read it, man!” muttered the elder George Poyntz, with a half-groan of agonized impatience.

But the lawyer was nothing if not deliberate, and breaking the seal with grave slowness and caution, he drew forth the sheet of paper folded inside, and opening it out,

cast his eye down the contents before beginning to give his listeners the benefit of it.

"Read it, can't you?" ejaculated the sick man fiercely, beginning to tremble so violently that his wife whispered to him reproachfully, and George the younger patted his shoulder soothingly, with a muttered injunction to "Hold her head steady there, a point closer to the wind!"

Mr. Holtum's usually inscrutable face brightened visibly as he opened his mouth to begin to read, but as no one knew which side he favoured, little was to be gained from this.

"This is the last Will and Testament of me, Arthur Poyntz, made this tenth day of November, 18—, as follows," read the lawyer in calm even tones; "'I give, devise, and bequeath the black ape with the looking-glass, to Hester Dayrell, my dead sister's child, bidding her open its neck, and take possession of the treasure contained within. At the same time enjoining her to care for and succour Song, of Limbau, the half-moon girl, should need for such care arise. Anything else of which I may die possessed, I leave to my brother George, or his heirs, always excepting the curiosities arranged for the Stourbridge Museum.'"

A terrified cry from Mrs. Poyntz caused the reading to terminate abruptly; her husband, relieved of the strain of long-endured suspense, had fainted, and the room was quickly cleared, in order that he might recover from his swoon.

Downstairs they talked in undertones whilst they waited to hear that the sick man was better.

"Miss Hester, you may congratulate yourself on being in a fair way to inherit something this time at least, though I am afraid it won't be a very handsome amount, since it is small enough to be tucked away in a monkey's neck," said the lawyer with a grim smile.

"It will at least prove that I am not forgotten. And I am so glad it was in my power to be kind to poor little Song," murmured Hester, with tears in her eyes.

"Queer affair altogether, though, to send the property

home to England and keep the will in Borneo ; looks as if the poor man couldn't have been quite right in his head," soliloquised the lawyer, on whom the strange provision of the will seemed to have made a great impression.

"He might have deemed it safer so, though another man would have reversed the order and sent the will home, leaving the property behind," replied Professor Pringle, equally puzzled concerning the matter, but consumed with curiosity to know the amount of the sum left to Hester. Arguing from his own knowledge of the life of a naturalist, he did not deem it possible for Arthur Poyntz to have saved a large sum of money from his earnings, though he might have had some windfall of which his friends knew nothing.

Presently George came down to say that his father had recovered consciousness, and was asking for Hester, who rose immediately to obey the summons, her colour coming and going in a manner very unusual with her.

"Don't stay long with your uncle, Hester ; we will hurry back to Stourbridge to see what it is the black monkey is holding in custody for you," said the Professor, as she followed her cousin from the room.

Hester nodded, being as full of eager curiosity as any one else, and determined to cut the interview as short as possible.

Going upstairs by her side, George seized her hand, whispering sympathetically, "It's rough on you, Hester, I know, to be sent off with a little cash stowed away in the neck of a monkey after all your pluck in going so far to find the will. But don't you trouble, my dear ; I'll marry you as soon as I get my captain's certificate, and take care of you for the remainder of my life."

"Very much obliged to you, Cousin George, but having conscientious scruples about being married out of pity, I must beg to decline your kind offer," she retorted scornfully, darting past him into her uncle's room, and utterly declining any more overtures of a similar nature.

George Poyntz the elder held out a trembling hand to her.

"Forgive me, my girl, for all my jealousy and dislike of you, but Heaven alone knows what I've suffered since the old man died, leaving that tantalising will behind him."

"I forgive you, Uncle George, and we can be better friends now that there is no question of rivalry between us," she said cheerily, and prompted by some kindly impulse she leant over and kissed him for the first time in her life, and it might be for the last also, seeing that she was not fond of that kind of demonstration.

It was a very eager and excited group that gathered an hour or so later in the Professor's private room at the Stourbridge Museum—the Professor, Mrs. Pringle, Hester, and the lawyer. Whilst the solemn-visaged black monkey critically examined its features in the fragment of looking-glass as though it had no momentous secret hidden under its ugly skin.

The Professor, using a sharp knife, cut deeply into the under part of the neck, his knife striking against some hard substance contained inside.

"Ah, here it is," he exclaimed, drawing out the knife and putting in his hand.

A moment's fumbling produced a small leather bag, and this being opened revealed the glorious Pontianak diamond, which, catching the feeble light of the November sunshine, caused the amazed onlookers to sit spell-bound with surprise.

"Is that a diamond?" whispered Hester in an awestruck tone.

"It is, the biggest one that I have ever seen, too. Miss Hester, that little piece of glitter would buy up the whole Swarling Tower estate and leave a comfortable surplus as well. You are to be congratulated on your good fortune!" said the lawyer, rubbing his hands in great satisfaction.

"Hester, dear child, I am so glad!" murmured Mrs. Pringle through her tears; but the Professor sat staring at the diamond and said never a word. It seemed almost as though the sight of the gem had paralysed his utterance.

The lawyer, however, was thoroughly wide-awake and alert, and rising from his seat he said briskly, "The best thing to be done is to lodge it in the bank at once; property of such an extremely portable nature is better not exposed to the risks of an ordinary dwelling."

The Professor found his voice then, saying in a bewildered tone, "And to think of it having been so slenderly guarded all these months. Why it might have been stolen a dozen times over before now."

"Of course," said Hester, "but then no one had any idea that anything worth stealing was there."

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It was three or four days after this before Hester saw her cousin George again, and by that time a Hatton Garden expert had valued the Pontianak gem, declaring it to be worth sixty thousand pounds; and negotiations were at once put in hand for its purchase by an American millionaire.

George was distinctly apologetic, even crestfallen, and blundered direfully over his congratulations.

"I am going off next week," he said in a jerky tone, "and though I'm glad, of course, for you, I'm awfully sorry you are going to be so rich."

"I'm not," she retorted gaily. "Money is very desirable, when properly used, as I hope to use it. At least no one will need to marry me out of pity now, will they, Cousin George?" and she looked up into his face with a mischievous laugh.

But he flashed out in sudden, righteous anger, "I didn't think you mean enough to laugh at a fellow's honest affection. At any rate I wasn't after your money, as the next man who wants to marry you may be."

"No," she said demurely, "I am sure you were not, and, George, when you get your captain's certificate, you may ask me again, if you like."

And he did.

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